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Discover Britain's oldest dog breed

25 *for* 2025

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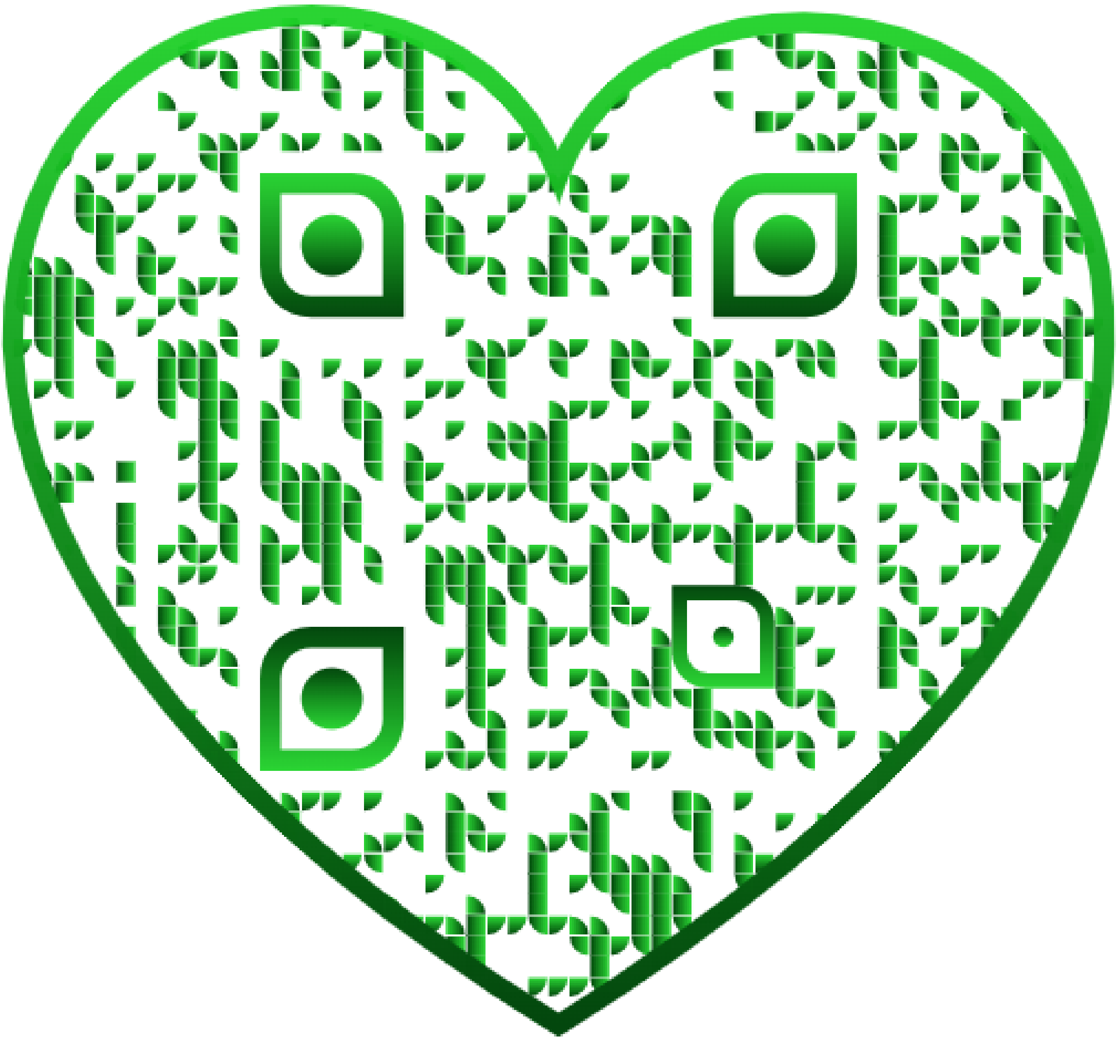

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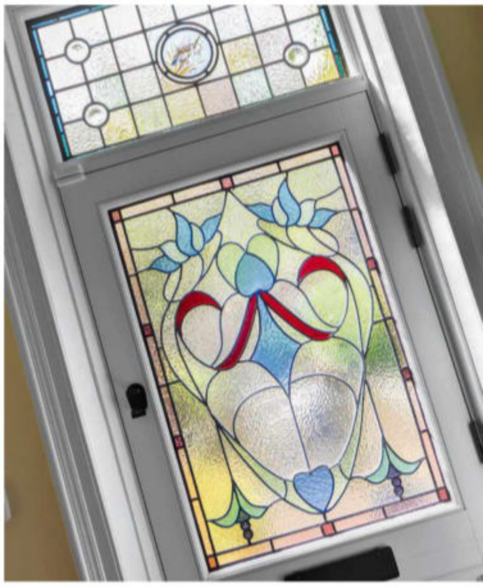

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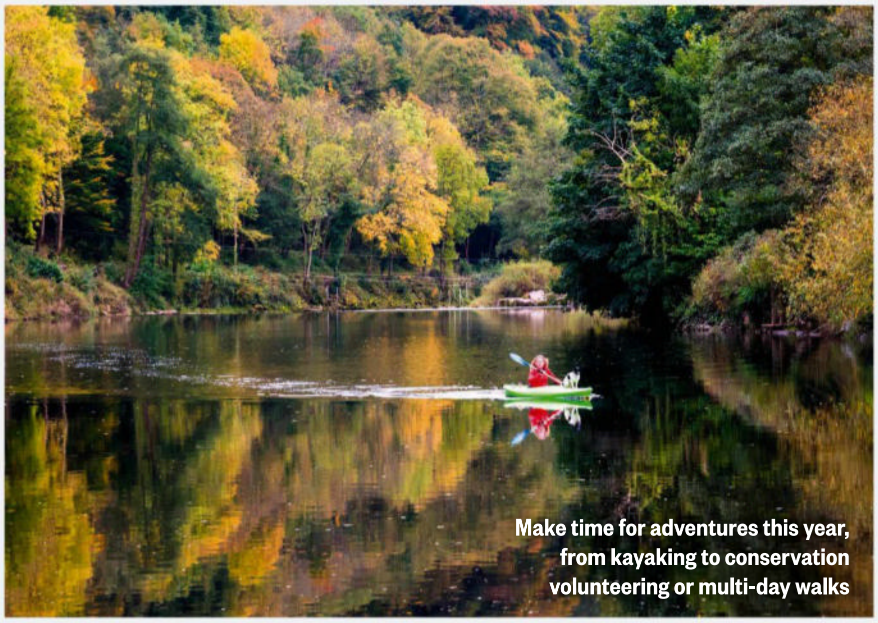

Make time for adventures this year, from kayaking to conservation volunteering or multi-day walks

Easy new year wins

Two of the best wildlife encounters I had in 2024 took place while I was out on kayaks. Firstly, an osprey dived to take a fish from near the surface just metres from me, drops of water dripping on to my life vest from the unlucky specimen as it was hoisted over my head. The other came while I was idly paddling along in light rain on a hot day, following a kingfisher as it worked its way downstream – I began to daydream that the bird was an impatient guide showing me where to go.

I mention this because on both occasions, I found myself wondering why I don't do this more often. It's easy, in every sense. But so many of the best things in life are easy, yet when we do get around to them, many of us – like I did – find ourselves wondering why we don't do them more often.

To this end, we've pulled together 25 easy things to do in 2025 (page 50) that are guaranteed to increase your enjoyment of life, while giving a boost to both physical and mental health. After all – what are we waiting for? From all of us at *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, I wish you a peaceful and positive new year.

PS There's no column from John Craven this issue, but fear not, he'll be back as usual next month!

Paul McGuinness, editor@countryfile.com

Don't miss our nature and countryside Plodcast, available on all podcast providers

BBC COUNTRYFILE MAGAZINE
The Plodcast

COUNTRYFILE on TV

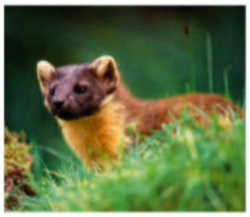
What to watch on *Countryfile* this month*

5 January

John Craven visits Farmoor Reservoir and Nature Reserves in Oxfordshire to discover the stunning array of winter wildlife, both there and further afield.

12 January

Sammi Kinghorn and Matt Baker are off to the Shropshire Hills to greet one of our most amazing winter visitors: the Atlantic salmon. They will explore how local communities are fighting to protect and clean up their rivers to encourage more of these endangered fish to return.

19 January

Joe Crowley and Anita Rani travel to a secret location in Dartmoor on the trail of 15 newly released pine martens – the first in the south-west of England for over 100 years.

26 January

On the 20th anniversary of the New Forest National Park, the *Countryfile* team heads to Hampshire to uncover hidden stories of the landscape's past and present beneath the tree canopy.

*Exact content of programmes may vary

BBC ONE

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Adam Henson, "AI is transforming the future of British farming", p23
"Since the Industrial Revolution, every generation of farmers has dealt with the technological changes of the day."

James Witts, "Wave of popularity", p70
"Sea shanties were performed by multicultural crews whose only shared language was song."

Nicola Chester, "It's time to commune with our past", p98
"This bare season has a beauty and intrigue all of its own, where surprising stories might surface."

Photos: Alamy

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SUBSCRIPTIONS AND BACK ISSUES
Annual subscription rates (inc P&P):
UK/BFPO £61.75; Europe and Republic of Ireland £72.50; rest of world £76.50.

FRONT COVER IMAGE
Ariel Wojchiechowski, Celtman Extreme Triathlon (14 June 2025, xtriworldtour.com)

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Jan–Dec 2022
36,420

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A breath of fresh air for the new year

Fill your 2025 with inspiration and new adventures with a subscription to *BBC Countryfile Magazine*

Check out this month's special subscription offer, page 26

A mountain hare dressed in its best winter white faces into gale-force winds and swirling spindrift on an exposed plateau in the Cairngorms National Park

Photo: Andrew Parkinson/naturepl.com

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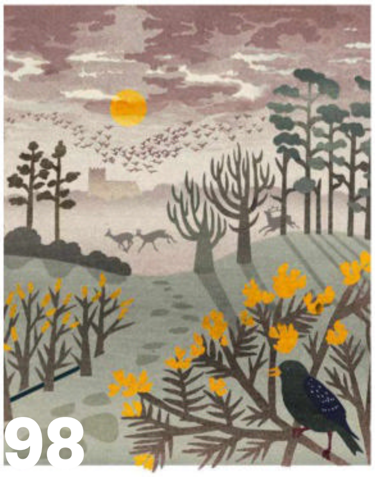
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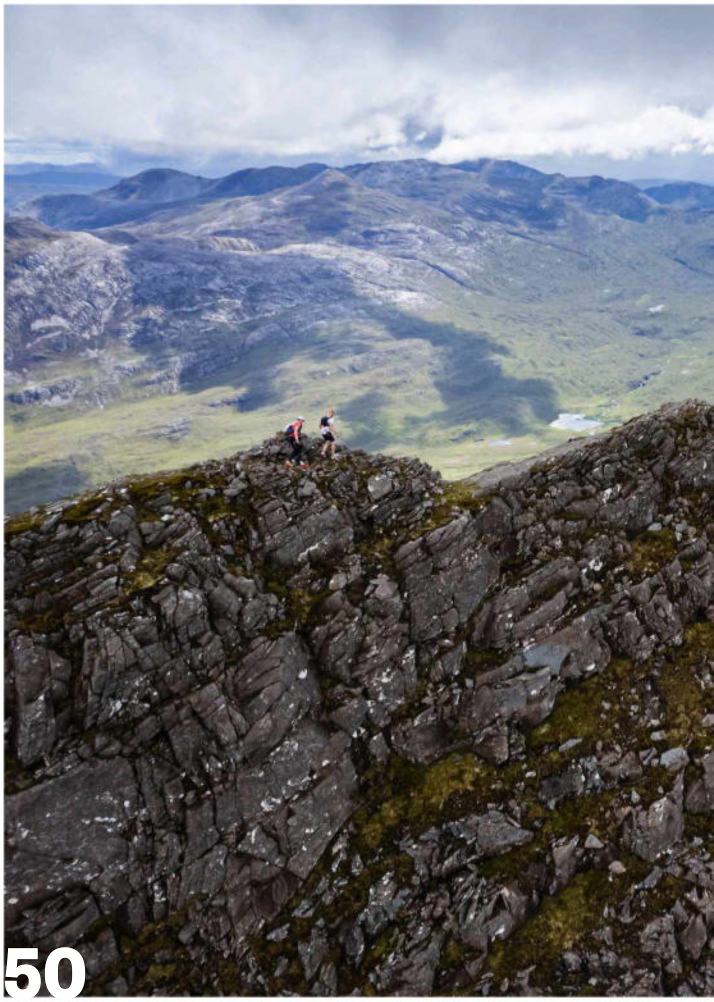
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CS It's taken nine years so far, but Sophie-lee Williams is on a mission to bring white-tailed eagles back to Wales.

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60 SCOTLAND'S GENTLE GIANT

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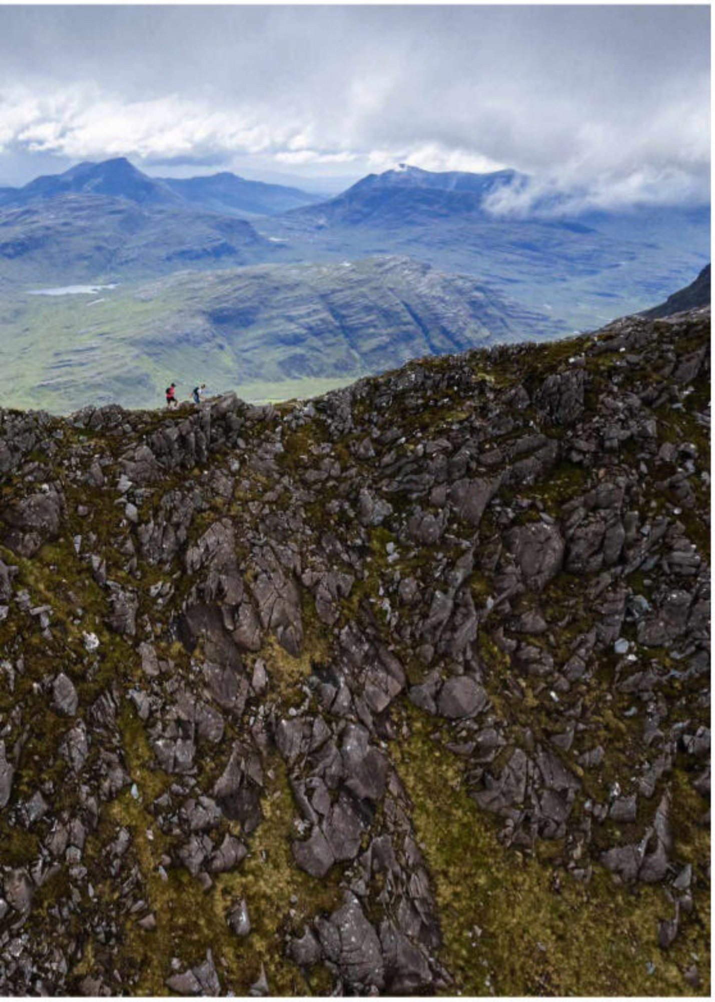
CS As sea shanty festivals draw in the crowds, we explore the history and enduring appeal of maritime melodies.

Photos: Steve Ashworth; Jen Chillingsworth



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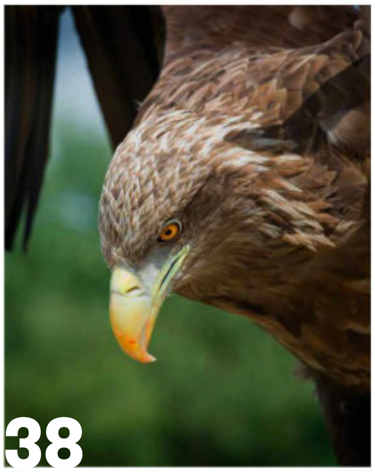

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ON THE COVER

On Scotland's Loch Shieldaig, kayakers trail competitors in the Celtman Extreme Triathlon.

January

NATURE | TRAVEL | NEWS | VIEWS

Find time for reflection in the Scottish Highlands

The snow-capped Buachaille Etive Beag (pronounced 'boo-ach-eel-ya echiv bake' and meaning 'the small herdsman of Etive') is reflected in Lochan na Fola in the early morning light. The munro, with a height of 958m (3,143 ft), sits eight miles east of Glencoe village on the dramatic A82 and is a popular hiking destination in summer, aided by the views from the summit of its larger sibling, Buachaille Etive Mòr (1,021m) and Loch Etive.

Photo: Ross Hoddinott/naturepl.com

Britain's best viaducts

Boasting wood, worms and wizards, the UK has a wealth of wonderful viaducts. **Matt Baird** picks six you can explore via rail, foot and bicycle

1 RIBBLEHEAD VIADUCT, NORTH YORKSHIRE

The longest structure on the Settle to Carlisle line, construction on this 400m-long viaduct began in 1869 and it opened to passengers in May 1876. The build not only cost more than £50 million in today's money, but also took the lives of more than 100 men from accidents, fighting and outbreaks of smallpox in the shanty town near the viaduct's base.

2 GLENFINNAN VIADUCT, INVERNESS-SHIRE, SCOTLAND

One of the most elegant viaducts in the world, the Glenfinnan Viaduct on the West Highland Line is a 30m-high, 380m-long feat of Victorian engineering that attracts around 500,000 visitors per year, many of them keen Harry Potter fans. With views over Loch Shiel and the Glenfinnan Monument, Robert McAlpine's 21-arch design was known for its innovative use of concrete. Opened in 1901, it's still the longest concrete rail bridge in Scotland.

3 KNUCKLAS VIADUCT, POWYS, WALES

This picturesque Victorian viaduct carries the Heart of Wales line across a tributary of the River Teme. The 23m-high, 174m-long structure has 13 arches and is crowned with two round medieval-style towers, believed to have been commissioned by a local landowner. The structure was built using rough stone, giving the impression the bridge is much older than its 1864 completion date suggests.

4 BARMOUTH BRIDGE, GWYNEDD, WALES

Wooden and wonderful, this Grade II-listed bridge (also known as Barmouth Viaduct) crosses the mouth of the Mawddach Estuary at Barmouth on the western Welsh coast. Visually a cross between a pleasure pier and a timber rail bridge, the 820m-long structure carries the Cambrian railway line, as well as motorcycles, bikes and pedestrians (but not cars). Opened in 1867, a marine woodworm attack in the 1980s forced its closure for six months.

Photos: Alamy

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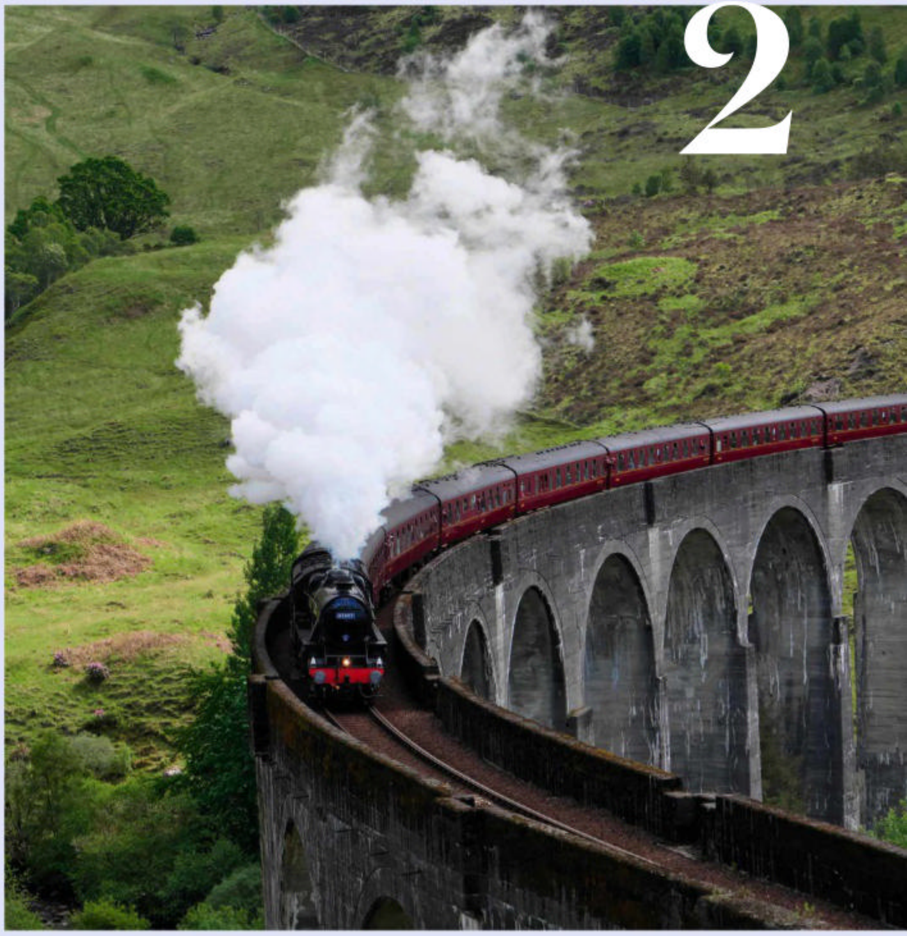
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5 OUSE VALLEY VIADUCT, HAYWARDS HEATH, SUSSEX

Designer John Urpeth Rastrick's 450m-long viaduct, celebrated for its ornate and elegant 37-arch design, carries the Brighton Main Line over the River Ouse in Sussex. Officially opened in 1841, its intended lifespan was only 120 years but today it's still a highlight of the Brighton to London railway line; an average of 52,000 people cross it each day. The viaduct gained Grade II-listed status in 1983 and extensive restoration work – largely in the northern arches and involving 2,600 bricks and 40 tonnes of stone – is now underway.

6 CRAIGMORE VIADUCT, NEWRY, NORTHERN IRELAND

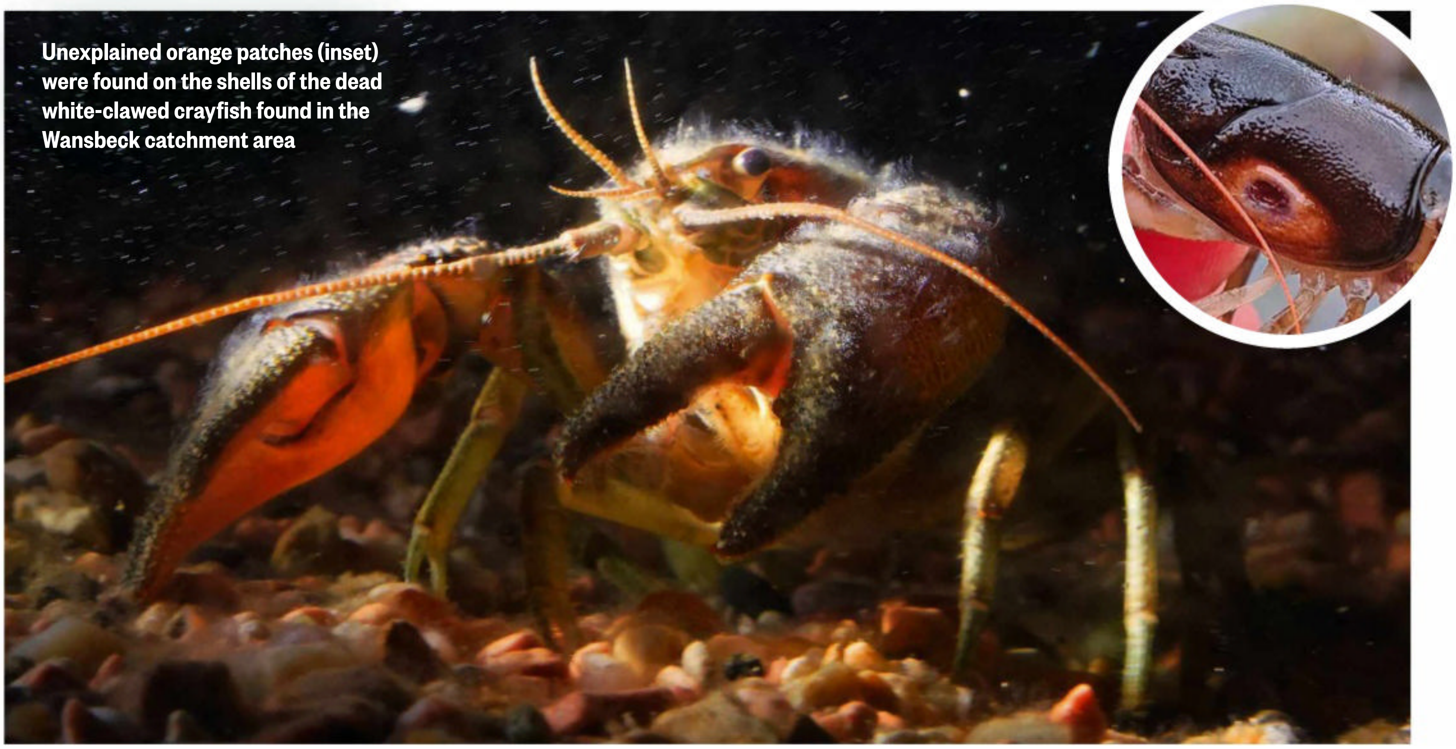
This 402m-long, 40m-high railway bridge is the tallest in Northern Ireland, its 18 arches spanning the Camlough River on the Belfast to Dublin line. Designed by John Benjamin Macneill, it's a commanding feature in the landscape. Using granite from a nearby quarry in its construction, work began in 1849 and was completed in 1852. During the Troubles, an Irish Republican Army bomb was detonated on the bridge just four minutes before a passenger train was scheduled to leave nearby Newry station and cross the viaduct.

Have your say Do you have a favourite rail journey? Get in touch at **editor@countryfile.com**

A significant population of white-clawed crayfish live, invasive-species free, in the River Wansbeck on the Wallington Estate

MYSTERY ILLNESS KILLS NATIVE CRAYFISH

A large-scale rescue mission is underway after 100 endangered white-clawed crayfish are found dead in Northumberland with mysterious markings



Unexplained orange patches (inset) were found on the shells of the dead white-clawed crayfish found in the Wansbeck catchment area

At least 100 white-clawed crayfish – Britain's only native freshwater crayfish – have been found dead in Northumberland, one of the endangered species' last remaining strongholds. The dead crustaceans were found with unusual orange patches on their shells.

Surveys have shown the mysterious orange marks are widespread on white-clawed crayfish across the River Wansbeck catchment area, with affected individuals also found in the Tyne and Blyth rivers.

The race is now on to protect the population. Sarah Jennings, area environment manager for the Environment Agency (EA) in the north-east, says: "We will carry out rescues to move some crayfish into quarantine so they can be monitored, and if healthy, released back into the wild in future." Jennings urges the public to help limit the spread of any potential infection in the Wansbeck catchment. "Advice includes thoroughly cleaning boots and equipment and anything else that has been in or around the river and its tributaries."

White-clawed crayfish mate in the autumn, meaning many of the rescued females will be carrying eggs; the females hold their eggs under their tails for eight to nine months while they develop. Rescued egg-carrying females will be taken to Northumberland Zoo, where the young will be reared then released at safe sites.

Others will be quarantined in tanks at the National Trust's Wallington Estate near Morpeth, where they will stay for a minimum of three months. If they remain healthy, they will be released back into the wild.

It is hoped these measures, alongside ongoing efforts by the Northumberland Crayfish Partnership, will safeguard this important species. Jennings says the work is "a positive step in what is still a concerning and developing situation".

In the search for a cause of the fatalities, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science has already ruled out water pollution and various common crayfish diseases, such as white spot syndrome virus and crayfish plague. Some of the dead crayfish were carriers of a deadly parasite, but this does not explain all of the deaths. The EA is monitoring 30 of the affected crayfish to gain a better understanding of the condition.

Nick Allen, a National Trust ranger at Wallington, says: "This latest challenge to one of our country's native species is a stark reminder of the increasing number of threats nature is facing."

The white-clawed crayfish population has been in decline since the 1970s, due to factors including habitat loss and competition from invasive species, such as the larger and more aggressive North American signal crayfish. **Beki Hooper**

Photos: National Trust Images/Lis Ford, View It 360

Some locals are opposing a seaweed farm near Port Quin

TENSIONS SIMMER OVER CORNISH SEAWEED FARMS

Seaweed farms promise rural investment, but locals are questioning their true environmental impact and governance

Seaweed has the potential to be one of the most environmentally friendly products of the future – with uses in fertilisers, pharmaceuticals, bioplastics and animal feed, plus it stores carbon to mitigate against climate change. Seaweed farming is gathering pace, with the creation of jobs, investment and sustainable business opportunities some of the touted benefits. So why are people upset by proposals for farms off Cornwall's coast?

Barnaby Kay, spokesperson for the Save Port Quin group that's opposing a seaweed farm in the bay, says the problems started with a poor consultation process, with residents left in the dark because of a lack of transparency. He describes the licensing authority, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), as "under-resourced, badly trained and badly governed".

The company behind the Port Quin farm, Biome Algae, didn't respond when we asked for comment. In September 2024, it had to resubmit its seaweed farm proposals now being considered by the MMO. In its latest document, Biome says the seaweed industry is starting to thrive in the UK. "There is clear scientific evidence that demonstrates seaweed farming enhances biodiversity, restores marine habitats and provides ecosystem services such as improving water quality," it claims.

A blog written for the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science in 2022 said the number of farms in the UK had risen from one in 2016 to 10. The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) says possible negative impacts of seaweed farms include nutrient depletion, equipment loss, potential shading of vulnerable species such as seagrass and the entanglement of marine mammals in mooring lines. **James Fair**

Wales' first seaweed and shellfish farm, Câr-y-Môr in Pembrokeshire, uses no fertilisers, pesticides or fresh water

Photos: Alamy

Orford Ness's wild and remote coastal shingle habitat is ideal for several species of jumping spiders

RARE SPIDERS THRIVE IN SUFFOLK NATURE RESERVE

Spiders make a comeback on an abandoned military test site

In Suffolk, abandoned military buildings lay scattered along the largest shingle spit in Europe. They are foreboding to look at; severe and brutal against the backdrop of the North Sea. This place isn't, at first glance, somewhere you might presume to be a wildlife haven. However, a recent survey conducted by the British Arachnological Society has found that it's positively crawling with spiders.

Orford Ness was once a military testing site; it was sold to the National Trust in the 1990s and has since been managed as a coastal nature reserve. It's of international importance, largely because of its rare and fragile vegetated shingle habitat.

Recently, members of the British Arachnological Society (BAS) conducted surveys to find out how many species of spider live on the site. They discovered a total of 55 species, five of which are rare in the UK and a further seven are considered nationally scarce. One of the rare species – *Neon pictus* – has never been seen in Suffolk before. It's a tiny type of jumping spider, only 3mm in length. Another rare species – *Gnaphosa lugubris* – is usually found in very small numbers, but at Orford Ness experts believe it may be present in its thousands. The findings show that careful habitat management, and a lack of disturbance by humans, can lead to booming biodiversity for our eight-legged neighbours.

"It's great to see that the careful management of the site's habitats support so many of these often maligned but important species," says Ben McCarthy, head of nature conservation and restoration ecology at the National Trust.

The reserve re-opens to the public on 5 April 2025; book your ticket in advance online (nationaltrust.org.uk). **Beki Hooper**

Photos: ©National Trust Images/Justin Minns

The Plodcast

Tune your ears into our podcast this January

7 January
Plodcast host Fergus Collins leads a new year walk looking for a mysterious Templar church lost deep in the Herefordshire countryside.

14 January
Head to Uley hillfort in the Cotswolds to learn about the magic, atmosphere and meteorological science of fog and mist with Laura Pashby, author of *Chasing Fog*.

21 January
As the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch takes place, Plodcast host Fergus surveys the residents of his new home on a farm deep in the Monmouthshire countryside.

28 January
Join Plodcast regular Kevin Parr on a quest for hen harriers and other mysterious creatures in Lancashire's great wilderness, The Forest of Bowland (below).

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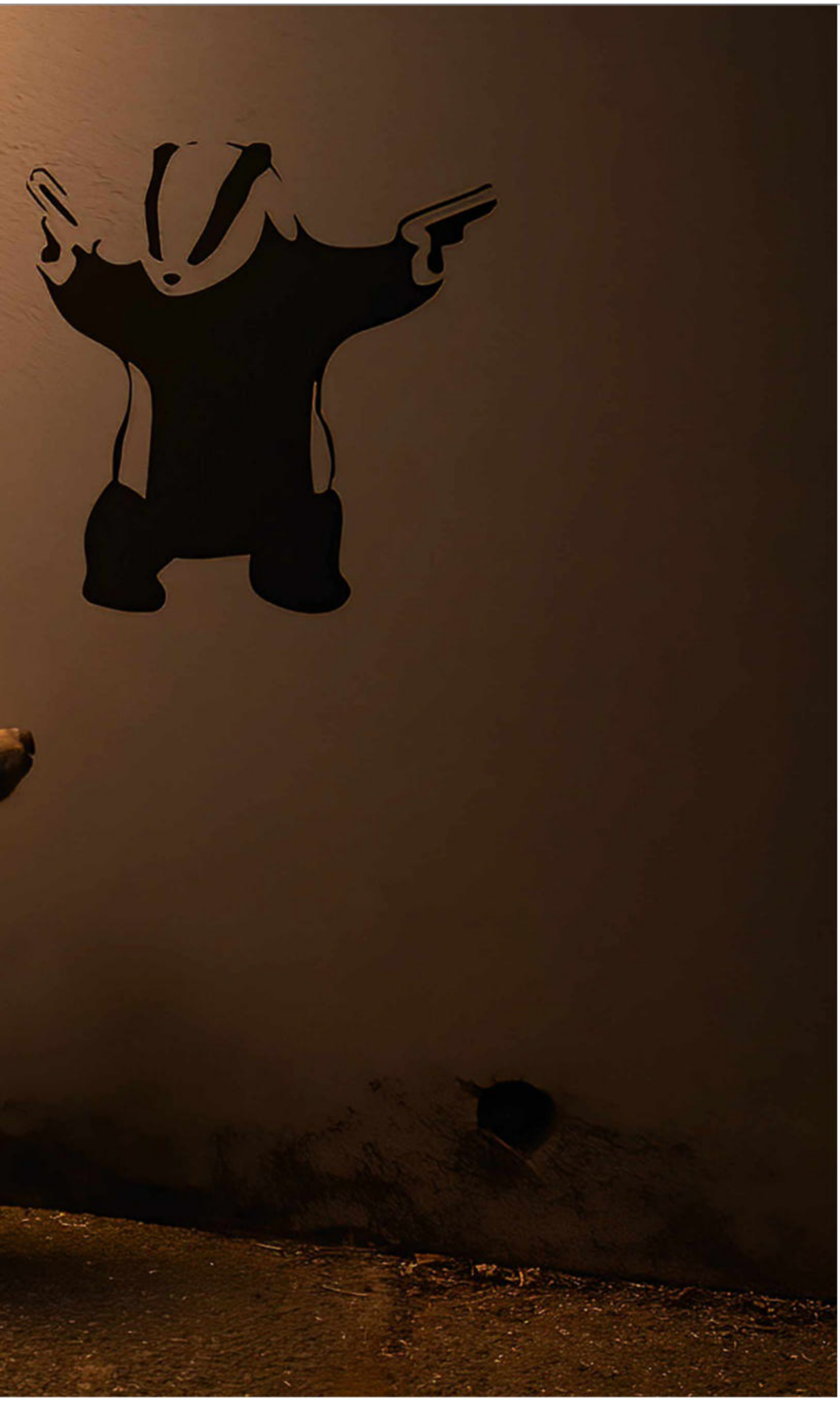
A streetlight illuminates the curious badger in Ian Wood's image nominated for the Wildlife Photographer of the Year People's Choice Award



WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR SHORTLIST REVEALED

The People's Choice Award for 2024 includes ambling badgers, lounging seals and mountain pumas

The shortlist for the Wildlife Photographer of the Year People's Choice Award 2024 has been announced, and you can put in a vote for your favourite image before the end of January.

This year's selection of 25 photographs from around the globe was chosen from an incredible 59,228 entries. The shortlist includes 'No Access': Ian Wood's remarkable shot of an ambling Eurasian badger appearing to glance up at badger-themed graffiti on a quiet road in St Leonards-on-Sea, Hastings, Sussex.

Local residents had been leaving food scraps on the pavement for foxes, but Ian noticed badgers from a nearby sett were also coming to forage. He then built a small hide at the edge of the road to take this memorable picture.

Wildlife Photographer of the Year is developed and produced by the Natural History Museum in Kensington, London. Voting closes at 2pm on Wednesday 29 January 2025. CF

Vote now!

To find out more about each photo and to cast your vote, visit the website *nhm.ac.uk/wpy/peoples-choice*

Photo: Ian Wood/Wildlife Photographer of the Year

The impressive motte-and-bailey castle at Tamworth, built around 1070, overlooks the mouth of the Anker River

Photos: Alamy

TAMWORTH CASTLE PLACED ON HISTORIC ENGLAND'S AT RISK REGISTER

Historic England adds 155 sites to its Heritage At Risk Register 2024, including a Norman castle and a Tudor fortress

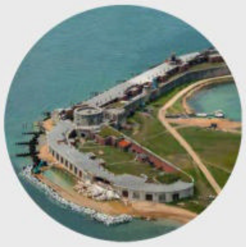
More sites were added to Historic England's Heritage At Risk register in 2024 than were removed, says the organisation. The annual register lists more than 4,000 vulnerable buildings, ruins, gardens and monuments; it provides an overview of the state of the country's most important historic sites while also funnelling funding into the most urgent restoration projects.

Each year, the register evolves, as sites that were at risk but have successfully been

MAJOR VULNERABLE SITES ADDED IN 2024

TAMWORTH CASTLE
Staffordshire
Grade I-listed, this is among the best-preserved motte-and-bailey castles in England. Rebuilt after the Norman conquest, it now needs significant structural repairs.

SMITH SQUARE HALL
Westminster, London
An early 18th century church-cum-music venue, this Baroque-style Portland Stone building requires repairs to cracks and upgrades to facilities.



HURST CASTLE
Hampshire
This Tudor fortress is at risk from erosion and rising sea levels but planned works by English Heritage and the Environment Agency should save it for future generations.

saved are removed, while others in dire need of attention are added. This year's list totals 4,891 sites, with 124 removed and 155 added. Of these 155, there are 69 buildings and structures, 55 places of worship, 24 archaeological sites, one park and garden and six conservation areas.

Noteworthy new places on the list include the Grade I-listed Tamworth Castle in Staffordshire (see above); the rare, six-sail Waltham Windmill in Lincolnshire, which is at risk from rainwater decaying timber and gear cogs; and Birmingham's 15th-century Kings Norton Old Grammar School. Also at risk is Heighington & Aycliffe Railway Station in County Durham, which was a pub before it became the world's first railway station in the 1830s; it was in use until the 1980s but has been derelict since 2017.

The broad range of sites also includes the building that protects the 3rd-century Roman Painted House at Dover, Kent; the 17th-century row of merchants' houses known as The Butterwalk in Dartmouth, Devon; and the imposing Victorian-era St John the Evangelist church in Sheffield, West Yorkshire, whose tower and 58-metre-high spire have been badly eroded by wind.

Crucially, the register opens the door to funding opportunities for those listed. In the past year, Historic England has assigned £8.14 million in grants for repairs to 191 sites. The organisation also works with partners, such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Natural England, to help bridge funding gaps while working with local authorities to deal with issues such as planning.

> **"IN THE PAST YEAR, HISTORIC ENGLAND HAS ASSIGNED £8.14M TO 191 SITES"**

Among 2024's success stories are an Iron Age hillfort in Exmoor National Park, cleared of damaging scrub and tree growth; one of Dorset's most remarkable country residences, Sherborne House, built in 1720 and transformed into a valued arts venue; the 1833 Goods Shed, part of the Stockton & Darlington Railway, thought to be the oldest example of its kind still standing, repaired as part of a wider railway heritage regeneration project; and the 17th-century sandstone Hunningham Bridge in Warwickshire, which had been damaged by road traffic and is now restored.

Historic England assesses Grade I and Grade II-listed properties to compile its Heritage at Risk Register. The register began in 1991 with the London Buildings at Risk survey and became the first National Buildings at Risk list in 1998.

Kirsten Henton

FOLKLORE FOCUS

Today's Twelfth Night traditions are a subdued version of riotous historic revelry, says **Pat Kinsella**

'The Twelve Days of Christmas' remains a popular carol in Britain, and many people still hold with the superstition that festive decorations must be taken down by 6 January, the twelfth day after Christmas Day, or bad luck will befall the household. However, before the country's Christmas traditions were transformed during the Victorian era, Twelfth Night was the climax of the whole festive season and an occasion of much raucous revelry.

Children today associate advent calendars with treats, but originally advent was a period of fasting that lasted from 1 December to the 24th, with Christmas celebrations beginning on 25 December and building to a peak on 6 January, the feast of Epiphany. Myriad merry traditions are connected to Twelfth Night, many of which have now been transferred to Christmas Day, including the baking of a booze-infused fruitcake. Now some people conceal coins in cakes, but in Tudor times a dried bean would be used; whoever got the slice with the bean would be Lord of Misrule for the day, granted license to create mischief.

Regional Twelfth Night traditions include wassailing in south-west England, when locals drink a mulled cider in orchards to garner a bountiful harvest, and the annual Haxey Hood event in North Lincolnshire, where the town's four pubs compete to gain possession of a leather hood.

Pear and ginger chutney

Plenty of cheese and crackers leftover after the Christmas festivities? Make Jen Chillingsworth's delicious and warming chutney for the perfect accompaniment

Making chutney is a great way to use up any gluts or leftover pieces of fruit and veg. We always have pears lurking in the fruit bowl and, as they never seem to ripen, we use them for baking or in this chutney recipe. Pear and ginger is a warm and spicy partnership, ideal for bringing comfort on a cold winter's day.

Feel free to swap out the pears for the same quantity of apples, rhubarb or tomatoes if you prefer. I'm a sultana (golden raisin) fan, so I like to add those to the mixture, but you could also use raisins or mixed dried fruit instead. If you like a hot chutney, throw in some chilli flakes when adding the ginger to the pan.

This chutney is a delicious accompaniment to cheeses, added to sandwiches or served on the side with curry and naan bread. It's simple to make and is a perfect addition to a homemade hamper.

Make sure any jam jars you use have been properly sterilised, otherwise the chutney will go bad. To sterilise jars, wash them in warm soapy water, rinse, then place in an oven heated to 130°C for 25 minutes. Scold the lids and seals in just-boiled water.

Jen Chillingsworth is a writer and photographer based in south-west Scotland. Her books include *Grow Green* and *Green Living*.

Photo: **Jen Chillingsworth**

Impress your new-year guests with this zingy homemade chutney

How to make it

MAKES FOUR SMALL JARS

225g dark brown soft sugar
225ml apple cider vinegar
1 tsp mixed spice
30g ginger, peeled and chopped finely
1 tsp ground ginger
3 shallots, finely diced
75g sultanas (golden raisins)
5 pears, cored and chopped into small cubes

---

1. Add the sugar, apple cider vinegar and mixed spice to a medium-sized saucepan.
2. Heat the mixture, stirring occasionally until it comes to a simmer.
3. Add the chopped ginger, ground ginger and the shallots to the pan, stir to combine.
4. Simmer gently for approximately 10 minutes until the liquid has reduced by half.
5. Add the dried fruit and the chopped pears and stir well to combine.
6. Simmer once again until the pears are soft and you have reached the desired consistency.
7. Decant the chutney into hot sterilised jars and seal.
8. Store in a cool, dark place. Once opened, keep in the fridge and use within three months.

Green Christmas

An extract from *Green Christmas: Sustainable Celebrations that Won't Cost the Earth* by Jen Chillingsworth (Quadrille, £18.99)

This was Sylvia's promise to you...

A generation ago, a woman named Sylvia made a promise. As a doctor's secretary, she'd watched stroke destroy the lives of so many people. She was determined to make sure we could all live in a world where we're far less likely to lose our lives to stroke.

She kept her promise, and a gift to the Stroke Association was included in her Will. Sylvia's gift helped fund the work that made sure many more of us survive stroke now than did in her lifetime.

Sylvia changed the story for us all. Now it's our turn to change the story for those who'll come after us.

Stroke still shatters lives and tears families apart. And surviving a stroke is just the start of a long and gruelling recovery journey. If you or someone you love has been affected by stroke – you'll know just what that means.

You can change the story, just like Sylvia did, with a gift in your Will. All it takes is a promise.

You can promise future generations a world where researchers discover new treatments and surgeries, and stroke survivors and their families have the support to find the strength and determination they need to find their way back to life.

Your promise today gives strength for tomorrow. Please, leave a gift in your Will to the Stroke Association.

Find out how by calling 020 7566 1505
or email legacy@stroke.org.uk
or visit stroke.org.uk/legacy

Finding **strength** through **support**

The Stroke Association is registered as a charity in England and Wales (No 211015) and in Scotland (SC037789). Also registered in the Isle of Man (No. 945) and Jersey (NPO 369), and operating as a charity in Northern Ireland.

Stroke Association

COLUMN *Adam Henson*

A VIEW FROM THE FARM

AI is already transforming the future of British farming

On farms all over the country, even the most traditional ones, thought is being given to the possibilities of AI. For the majority of farmers those two magic letters stand for one thing: artificial insemination. And no wonder, since the abbreviation has been in use since the 1940s when the first commercial artificial insemination service for cattle was offered to British farmers.

Now, slowly but surely, serious consideration is being given to the new kid on the block, artificial intelligence – the technologies that allow computers to learn, reason and solve problems.

It's early days for this technology and, for the moment at least, artificial intelligence isn't making much of an impact on the daily lives of most British farmers. But the way AI can transform agriculture in the near future is very much a reality in universities and research labs. My eyes were opened to the possibilities on a visit to Harper Adams University in Shropshire where cows were being automatically monitored in an innovative 'smart' dairy. AI was learning to recognise each individual cow and log its behaviour, eating patterns and milking efficiency. It then analysed the data to warn of any signs of illness.

Meanwhile, in my home county of Gloucestershire, work is underway to ensure that the upcoming generation of farmers isn't left behind. In a few weeks' time, newly arrived students at the Royal Agricultural University (RAU) in Cirencester will start their MSc course in Agricultural Technology and Innovation. At the heart of the prospectus is AI's role in making farming more effective, efficient, productive and robust in a world of changing weather patterns. This would have sounded like science fiction (and very far-fetched) when my dad studied at Cirencester in the 1950s, but now, 70 years on, I'm encouraged that tomorrow's agri-entrepreneurs are being armed with the know-how to succeed in the new digital age.

Scottish company IGS' vertical Growth Towers use AI to create the perfect growing environment

> **"AI MIGHT JUST PROVIDE THE ANSWER TO A WORRYING LABOUR GAP"**

Naturally, there are concerns about what all this might mean for the countless number of people who depend on farming for their livelihood. Will robotic agriculture take over; could jobs be wiped out; and will our food be grown without the human touch? Well, if the fear is a nationwide invasion of cybermen marching through the fields, then the answer is no. Much of the work on the average arable and livestock farm is carried out by very small teams and hi-tech gadgetry is nothing new.

It's a different story with soft fruit and seasonal veg, which are notoriously tender and need an army of pickers and packers who may find themselves replaced at some point by the sort of prototype precision-robots that have been trialled on the famous strawberry farm at Tiptree in Essex.

In recent years many places have struggled to employ and retain seasonal workers, so rather than create unemployment, AI might just provide the answer to a worrying labour gap. It's worth saying that this technology will need a whole new set of workers to produce the hardware, input new data and then install, maintain, repair and replace systems and kit. So don't despair but do consider upskilling.

Since the Industrial Revolution, every generation of farmers has had to deal with the technological changes of the day and they have successfully adapted to survive. Who knows, AI may well turn out to be just the latest in a long line of challenges to be embraced by versatile and resilient farmers. And anything that saves me the worry of checking the weather forecast day and night during harvest season must be a good thing. CF

Have your say What do you think about the issues raised here? Write to the address on page three or email **editor@countryfile.com**

BBC iPLAYER Catch up with Adam and the *Countryfile* team on BBC iPlayer.

Photos: Alamy

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DISCOVER

The Tamara Way

Skirting the Devon and Cornwall border, the pretty Tamara Coast to Coast Way offers a peaceful alternative to the busier South West Coast Path. **Dixe Wills** satisfies his adventurous spirit on an 87-mile walk beside the River Tamar

At the beginning of the Tamara Way, cross the River Tamar via the Cremyll Ferry to reach the gently sloping grounds of Mount Edgcumbe Country Park and its elegant 16th-century mansion

Photo: Alamy

Follow the river's gentle meanderings in the Tamar Valley National Landscape, formerly an AONB

"You haven't earnt that yet!" The exclamation comes from a jovial lady behind the till at a bijou health food shop in the Cornish village of Millbrook. The 'that' in question is a cheeky bar of vegan salted caramel chocolate that I've slipped in with my other, more dentist-friendly purchases.

She's right too. I've walked less than three miles from my starting point at Edgcumbe Park. However, when I tell her I have another 84 miles to go, she relents. "Well maybe a couple of squares then, just to keep you going."

The long-distance footpath I've just set out on is the 87-mile Tamara Coast to Coast Way (Hyns Tamara Arvor dh' Arvor in Cornish). Opened in 2023, it broadly follows the River Tamar, which has traditionally served as a rough Cornwall/Devon border. Heading out from the Tamar's broad estuary to the trickle at its source, it pushes onwards to the coast, joining the South West Coast Path to complete a 387-mile waymarked circuit of Cornwall.

I begin my journey by blundering off the sleeper train at Plymouth as dawn breaks, in plenty of time to wander the still quiet streets down to Stonehouse and the first ferry of the day to Edgcumbe. From Norman times up until the early 1800s, this ferry crossing over the Tamar was the way for travellers to enter Cornwall, albeit a somewhat hazardous one upon often choppy waters. Once over, I find I'm far too early to visit the 16th-century mansion at Mount Edgcumbe Country Park so content myself with wandering about a succession of formal gardens before setting off on a footpath around the coast in search of ill-deserved chocolate.

Just a few hours later, I'm heading back over the Tamar to Devonport on the Torpoint chain ferry, a sort of shuttling bridge. I confess, given my time over again, I'd take a bus from Devonport to the Royal Albert Bridge and avoid walking beside Plymouth's busy roads and seemingly endless military installations. However, Isambard Kingdom Brunel's awe-inspiring railway bridge makes it all worthwhile. Standing almost underneath it, I get an idea of the colossal scale of the enterprise. Completed in 1859, it's good to learn

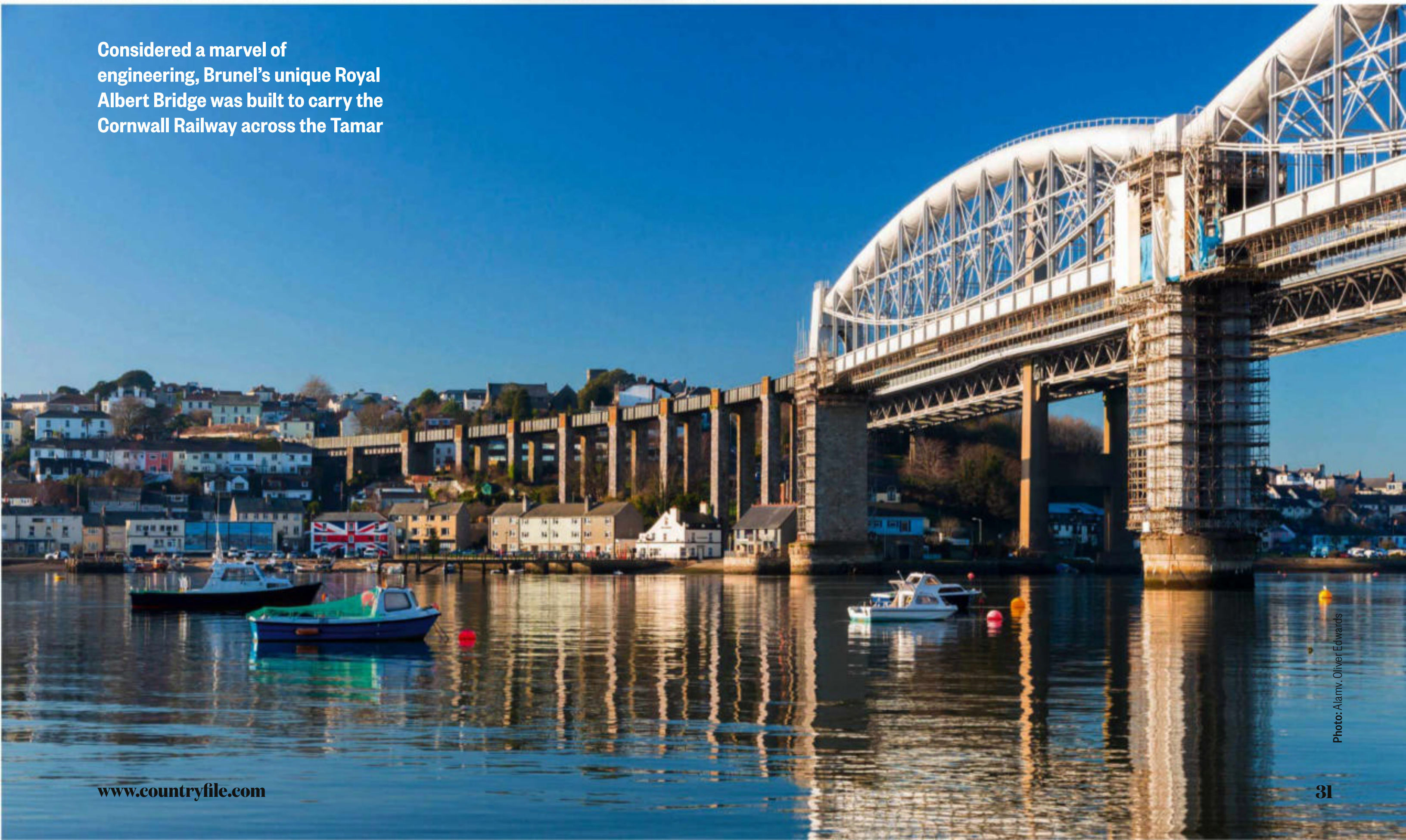
"From Norman times until the early 1800s, this ferry crossing was the way for travellers to enter Cornwall"

Photos: Alamy, Justin Foulkes

GUNNISLAKE
'OLD' MINE

Dixe finds a friend at Gunnislake, a village that once had a copper, tin and arsenic mine

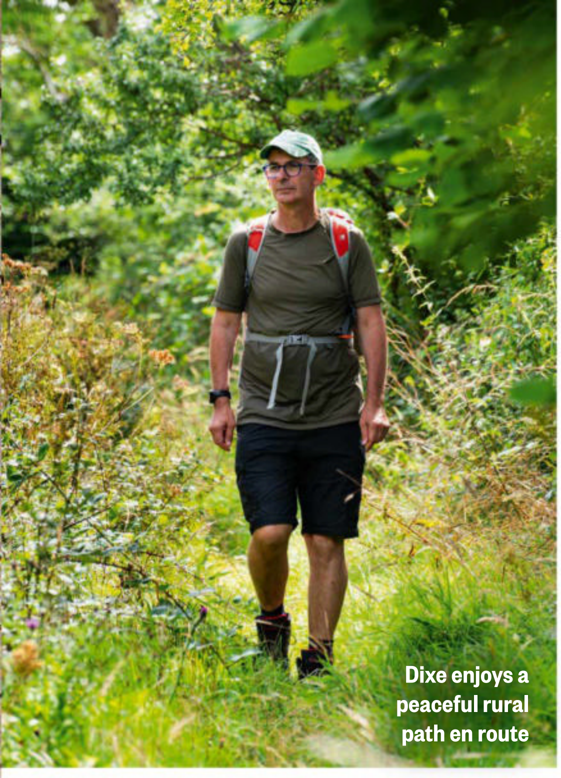
Take extra care on the stepping stones below Lopwell Dam



Considered a marvel of engineering, Brunel's unique Royal Albert Bridge was built to carry the Cornwall Railway across the Tamar

Photo: Alamy, Oliver Edwards

The Tamara Way takes you beneath Calstock Viaduct's 12 elegant arches made of pre-cast concrete blocks



Dixe enjoys a peaceful rural path en route

Cornwall's green fields await on the other side of the Tamar

> **"This second day is spent largely in blissful solitude on riverine paths and country lanes"**

that an ailing Brunel clung on to life just long enough to cross it himself.

The following morning, I visit the Tamar Bridge Visitor Centre and play with the exhibits (it's all right – you're allowed to) which seek to explain the bewildering engineering behind both Brunel's bridge and the Tamar Bridge, the 20th-century road bridge that now keeps it company.

RIVER CROSSINGS

This second day of my journey – spent largely in blissful solitude on riverine paths and silent country lanes – is dominated by the need to effect two further river crossings. It makes me feel like I'm back in the Middle Ages, when bridges were scarce and the course a traveller took was determined by the fords and ferries that allowed any rivers in the way to be negotiated. A couple of hours of pleasant rural rambling takes me into the Tamar Valley National Landscape with its woods and fields and marshes, and thence to Lopwell Dam, built across a tributary called the Tavey. The stepping stones immediately below the dam allow for safe passage across the river at low tide. I say safe but the stones are somewhat uneven and thrillingly slippery.

I now have to traverse the Tamar, which turns east below the village of Calstock. The ferry stopped sailing here a number of years ago. However, I'd discovered just before setting out that a trial re-opening of the service had just been launched. I duly entered into an enthusiastic correspondence with its skipper, Julian. He was excited about plans for a boat that can run on electricity from off-grid solar panels "making us totally self-sufficient for energy, with zero emissions... a first for a regular ferry service in the UK".

Unfortunately, having had to wait for the tide to ebb at Lopwell Dam, by the time I arrive at the Tamar crossing point – about eight miles later – the water is too low for the ferry to sail. (If you fancy catching it yourself, make sure to cross at Lopwell *before* high tide.) Thankfully, there's another, slightly unconventional means of crossing the river. And as a pleasant misty drizzle blossoms into diluvial downpour, I head steeply uphill through a sheltering wood to Bere Alston station for the seven-minute ride to Calstock via a glorious viaduct I've just walked beneath.

A port was established at Calstock in the 14th century to serve local silver mines. Boats filled with copper, lead and granite sailed down the Tamar until the early 1900s when the last mines in the district closed. Today, the attractive village's 11 pubs have been reduced to just two. And tempted though I am to lounge a while with an early evening pint, I set my wearying legs on course for Gunnislake, a few more circuitous miles up the river.

CHANGING CHARACTER

It is from this point that I notice a change in the character of the trail. The Tamar becomes a lot less visible. Henceforth I merely glimpse it here

Photos: Alamy, Justin Foulkes

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The 15th-century St Swithin's at Launcells includes remnants of an earlier 14th-century building

and there, such as when I cross back into Devon over the Horse Bridge – at nearly 600 years old, the river's most venerable crossing. And despite passing through the occasional village – Milton Abbot with its array of Edwin Lutyens Arts and Crafts houses is a highlight – my surroundings become increasingly remote. As I look out from a high field on the way to Lifton, the surrounding countryside is almost empty of buildings, save a distant smudge amidst the greens that my map tells me must be Launceston.

The August sun returns too, and I'm more than happy to seek out the damp coolness of churches that smell reassuringly of old hymn books and the dusty exhalations of muttered liturgy. St Swithin's at Launcells is particularly memorable. Hidden away in a valley, it's adorned with fragments of a Tudor wall painting featuring an anomalous man in Dutch clothing and fully lives up to Sir John Betjeman's appraisal of it as "the least spoilt church in Cornwall".

> **"I'm lucky to spot a pearl-bordered fritillary, with an underwing like an exquisite stained-glass window"**

I then meet the Bude Canal. Or at least the abandoned remains of it. Completed in 1823 to move lime-rich sand from beaches to the rural hinterland for use as fertiliser, its 35-mile network includes a long arm that heads south alongside the Tamar. Its pioneering design all but did away with locks. Instead, specially-made barges with wheels were raised and lowered on inclined planes by a water-powered system of chains. Not an hour passes without me coming across some remnant of this revolutionary canal, while one lengthy stretch of towpath has been transformed by nature into a rather magical tunnel of trees. Five miles of the network are today preserved by the Bude Canal Trust.

SOURCE CODE

Fittingly, my final day is the most enjoyable of all. I set off from the Upper and Lower Tamar Lakes, reservoirs fed by the river that have become popular for water sports. Passing through an increasingly bumpy landscape, and crossing the river one final time, I arrive at last at the Tamar's source. Or

Drink in ocean views from the dramatic cliffs near Morwenstow

sources, to be more precise, because it's actually a collection of small springs. A lovingly engraved slate on a large rock at the roadside advertises their unseen presence.

The final few miles to the sea take me through the vast and glorious Marsland Valley Nature Reserve, a steep-sided thickly-wooded wonderland where I'm lucky enough to spot a pearl-bordered fritillary, a butterfly with an underwing like an exquisite stained-glass window. The valley takes me gently down to Marsland Mouth and journey's end. I sit and watch the Atlantic waves mesmerically rolling in, then head along an unspoilt slice of coastline to the little village of Morwenstow.

Waiting in the tiny shelter for the bus (right) that will take me to a soft bed in Bude, I reflect on the 87-mile route I've just taken. For most of its length, it has guided me through lesser explored tracts of Cornwall and Devon – remarkably, I didn't meet a single other hiker. The lack of public footpaths in some places necessitated a lot more road-walking than I prefer, though at least it was mostly on country lanes. And there wasn't a great deal of accommodation, cafés, pubs or handy village stores en route after Plymouth. While this wasn't an insurmountable challenge, and was a tribute to the trail's adventurous spirit, it did mean forward planning was required, such as finding buses to take me to and from my night's lodgings towards the end.

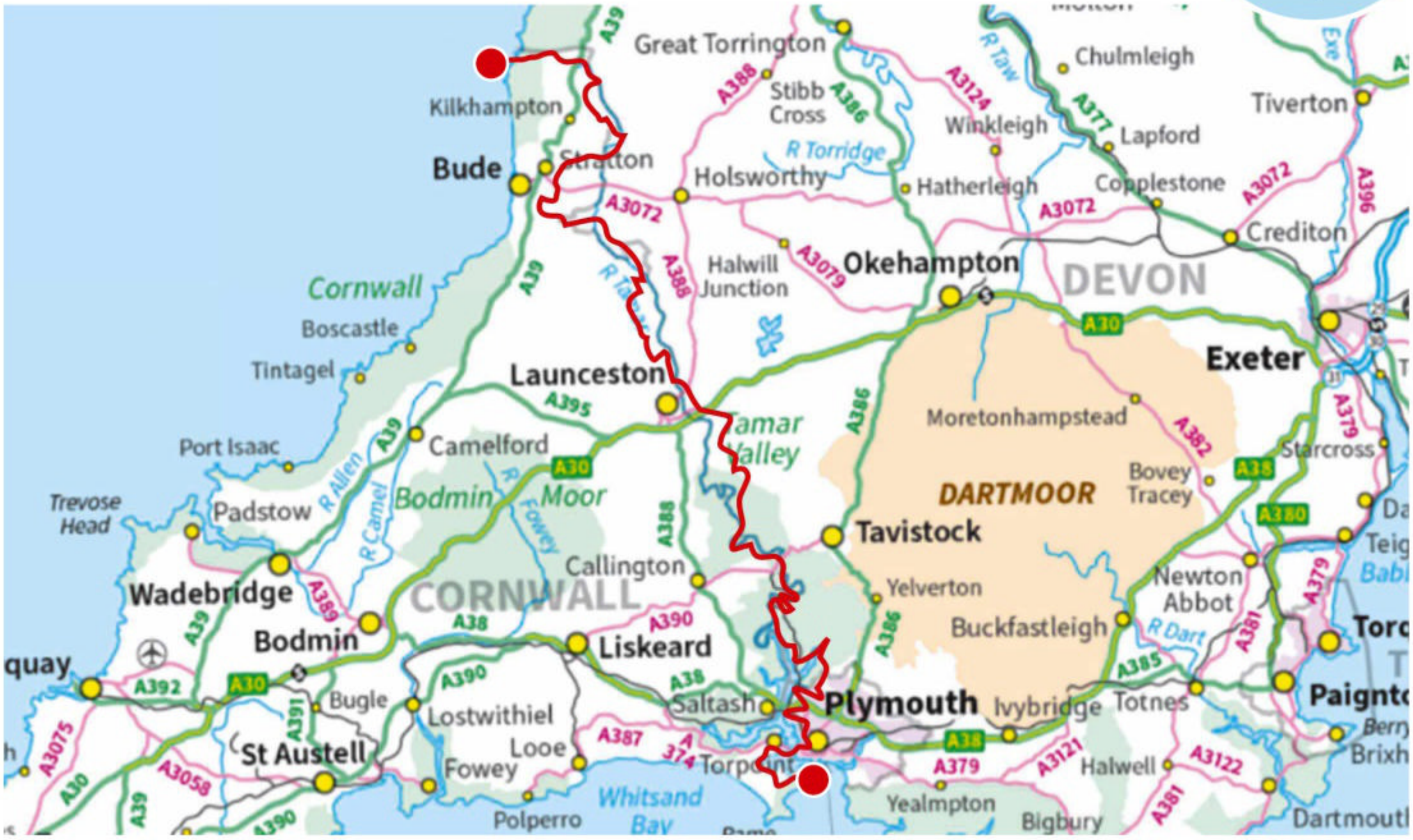
That said, I enjoyed the fact that walking the Tamara Way was less than straightforward – it made the completion of it, on a clifftop with sumptuous views of the sea, all the more satisfying. Needless to say, by then my chocolate bar had long since been devoured.

Dixe WIlls is an author and travel writer who writes for *The Guardian* on green travel. His books include *The Wisdom of Nature*, *Tiny Islands* and *Tiny Britain*.

Photos: Alamy, Justin Foulkes

NOW GO THERE

Dixe Wills' top picks for food, beds and travel on the Tamara Way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TRAVEL

To reach the start, take a day train or a sleeper train to Plymouth with GWR (**gwr.com**) from where you can walk (two miles – sadly there's no direct bus) to Admiral's Hard to take the Cremyll Ferry (**plymouthboattrips.co.uk/ferries/cremyll-ferry/**). Alternatively, hop on the 70 or 70B bus from Plymouth station for the near two-hour journey to Edgcumbe Park.

The ferry from Tamar Bridge to Torpoint (**tamarcrossings.org.uk**) runs every 10 minutes and is free for pedestrians.

The southern half of the route is well served by railway stations. There are also numerous bus stops along the route, though these thin out as you venture north. At the end, take the thrice-daily 217 bus from Morwenstow to Bude then the 12 to Plymouth railway station (both **gocornwallbus.co.uk**).

ACCOMMODATION

FERRY HOUSE INN, ST BUDEAUX, DEVON

Recently renovated, this historic inn on the east bank of the Tamar, with outdoor seating in the summer and log fires in the winter, has what must be one of the most spectacular pub bedroom vistas in the land. Throw your curtains wide and drink in a close-up view of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's awe-inspiring railway bridge. **ferryhouseinn.com**

DRAKEWALLS HOUSE, GUNNISLAKE, CORNWALL

Close to Gunnislake station and the town of Tavistock, Drakewalls House is a snug and friendly bolthole, offering a traditional bed and breakfast experience. It's a steep half-mile climb uphill from the Tamar but well worth the effort (and, hey, it's downhill the next day). **drakewallsbedandbreakfast.co.uk**

FREE HOUSE
THE KINGS ARMS

A hearty meal awaits at The Kings Arms

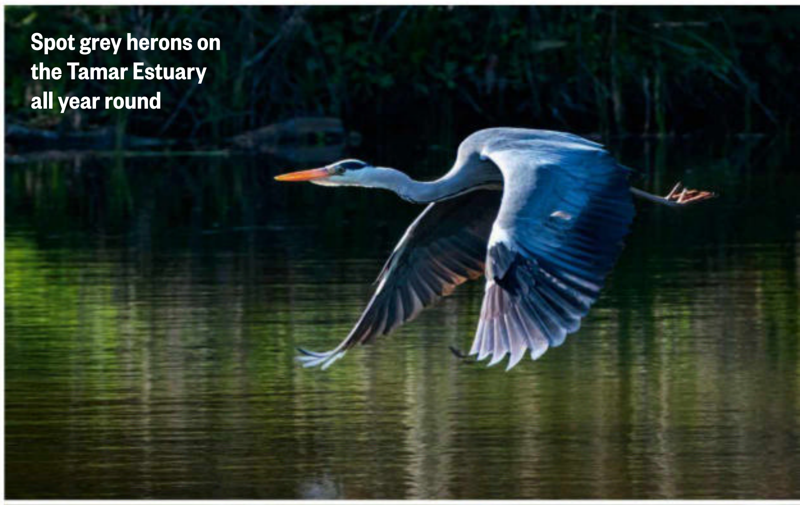
TINHAY MILL, TINHAY, DEVON

Just a 10-minute stroll from the trail as it passes through the ancient village of Lifton, cob-built Tinhay Mill began life in the 16th century as two mill cottages. Its thatched roof may be long gone but the exposed oak beams, five guest bedrooms with traditional furnishings and cosy open fires still provide plenty of atmosphere. **tinhaymill.co.uk**

▲ THE KINGS ARMS, STRATTON, CORNWALL

Easily accessible by bus from the northern stretches of the trail, the Kings Arms is a 17th-century coaching inn in a village best known for its proximity to the Battle of Stamford Hill during the Civil War. It has three double rooms each with their own bathroom, and the bars still contain original features, such as the flagstone floor. **kingsarmsstratton.co.uk**

You're most likely to see kingfishers during the breeding season, from April to August



Spot grey herons on the Tamar Estuary all year round

The Tamar and its tributaries are otter strongholds

TAMAR CAMPSITE, TAMAR LAKES, CORNWALL

Slap bang on the route, campers can relax by the two lakes, indulge in some watersports or go for a stroll through the site's woodland. If you've not brought a tent, you can book 'Lily', a cheery little four-berth wooden pod. **swlakestrust.org.uk/tamar-campsite**

FALCON HOTEL, BUDE, CORNWALL

A pleasingly grand affair overlooking the remnants of the Bude Canal, the Falcon was built in 1798 to provide a stop-over for coaches and their customers. The hotel offers various indoors and al-fresco options for a celebratory 'end of the walk' dinner. **falconhotel.com**

FALCON
HOTEL
FALCON INN
FREE HOUSE

Enjoy a well-earned supper at the Falcon

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The tempting Rectory Farm Tea Rooms at journey's end dates from the 13th century and boasts slate floors and original oak beams salvaged from local shipwrecks. **rectory-tearooms.co.uk**

If you fancy something a bit stronger, Morwenstow also runs to an equally ancient pub called The Bush Inn. **thebushinnmorwenstow.com**

In a boatyard near Bere Alston sits The Yard Café, a joyous little place where you can sip very reasonably priced beverages while watching the Tamar go by. **weir-quay.com**

The Tamar Lake Café offers lake views with its breakfasts, light lunches, cream teas and homemade cakes. **facebook.com/TamarLakeCafe**

WILDLIFE

The roads and path that make up the Tamara Way are liberally strewn with wildflowers, such as vetch and Aaron's rod – and otters have made the Tamar Lakes their home – but it's the avian life that made the biggest impression on me. I saw a good number of birds on the Tamar, including grey herons, little egrets and swans. I'd no sooner reached the wonderfully named Manure Canal when I had the joy of catching sight of a kingfisher. And at Greenscoombe Wood, an SSSI on a loop of the Tamar beyond Gunnislake, look for nuthatches, willow warblers and woodpeckers.

• For more information, see visitcornwall.com

Photos: Alamy, Rectory Tea Rooms

Where eagles Aberdare

White-tailed eagles could be about to return to South Wales – and it'll be down to the work of one woman. **Fergus Collins** talks to Sophie-lee Williams about her nine-year journey to welcome the raptors back

Sophie-lee Williams explores the rare sand dune system at Kenfig Nature Reserve in South Wales, a potential future habitat for white-tailed eagles

Transport yourself to 1830. To a stretch of woods, dunes and wetlands at Kenfig on the coast of South Wales. Above, plaintive shrieks draw your eye to a huge bird of prey, circling, clearly in distress. Below it, in a glade beside the water, its mate is dying, pierced by the steel jaws of a spring trap.

Weeks later, the surviving bird is shot by a wildfowler, who is toasted in the pub afterwards for a job well done. This, or a story very similar, is how the last recorded white-tailed eagles in Wales perished. None have bred there since.

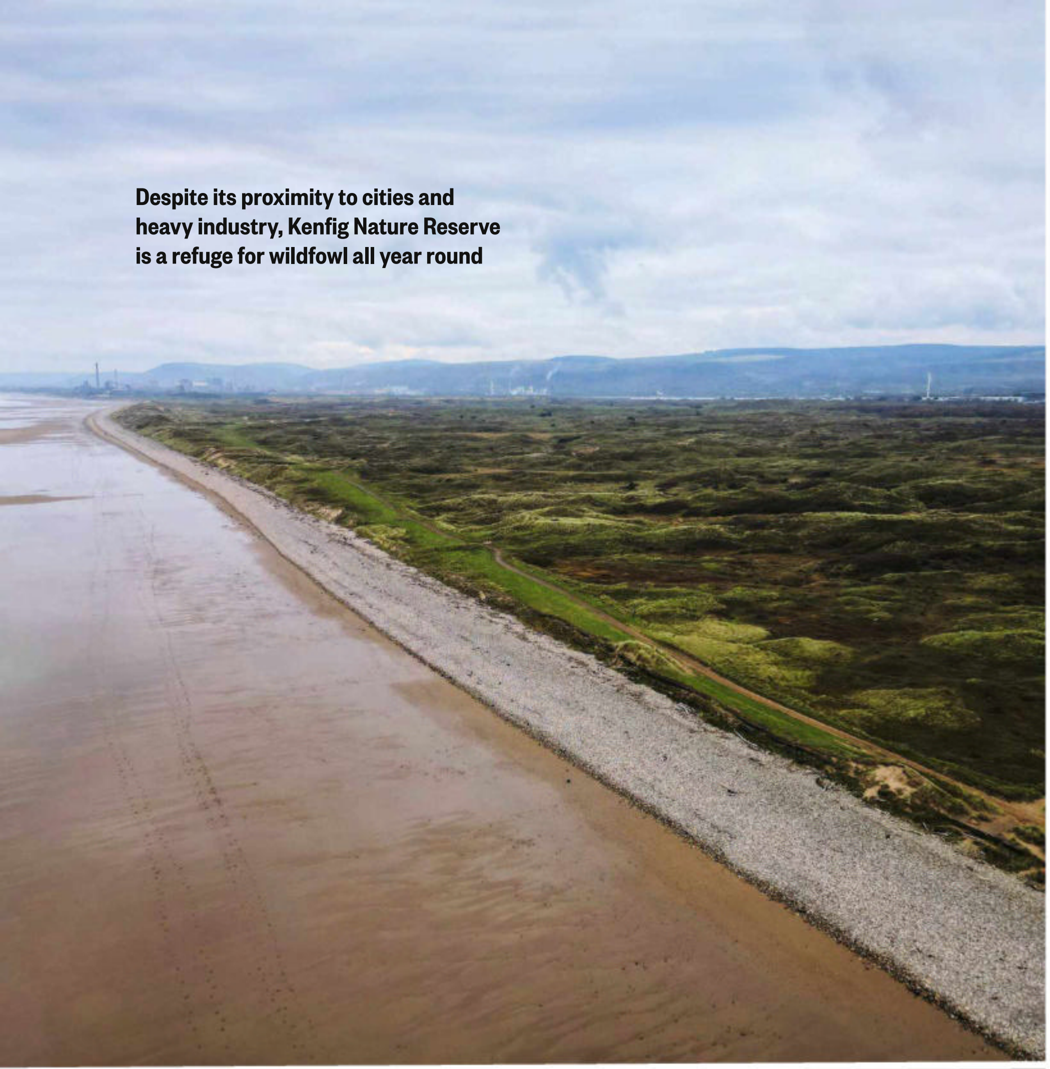
But now there's a good chance these hunters, with a massive 2.3m wingspan, will return to the skies of Wales – and it's down to the energy of one woman. Dr Sophie-lee Williams has devoted nine years to assessing the feasibility of reintroducing the eagles. Now, with funding and support from Durrell Wildlife, WWT and Gwent Wildlife Trust, she heads Eagle Reintroduction Wales (ERW) and is about to apply to Natural Resources Wales (NRW) for a licence to release white-tailed eagles, known in Welsh as eryr y môr (eagle of the sea). It would be a crucial piece in the eagle jigsaw of the British Isles following reintroductions in Scotland, Ireland and England.

A NATIVE WELSH CHAMPION

Sophie-lee grew up in the South Wales Valleys, the beautiful, sometimes bleak landscapes that bear the scars of mining and industry. As a child she roamed the moors above her home in Aberdare. "But there were only kestrels and occasional peregrines," the white-tailed eagle project officer explains. "When I later worked with golden eagles and other raptors in Scotland, I realised how bad things were at home. In Wales, like the rest of the UK, persecution by humans was the sole reason for the eagles' disappearance. There's plenty of food, there's plenty of habitat."

For Sophie-lee and many others at the forefront of reintroductions, a large part of the motivation is to

Photo: Steve Sayers



Despite its proximity to cities and heavy industry, Kenfig Nature Reserve is a refuge for wildfowl all year round

The hides around Kenfig Pool attract birdwatchers on the lookout for rare species including bitterns and merlins

simply enjoy these long-lost wildlife spectacles. But there are cultural, ecological and even economic reasons for bringing the eagles back.

As a teenager, Sophie-lee found an outlet for her love of nature in an animal rehabilitation centre in Ebbw Vale, helping injured birds of prey. "I love working with raptors but I thought, I can do this in the wild." She did a zoology degree, but it was while studying for her Masters that she met legendary conservationist Roy Dennis and received a grant to join his study of golden eagles in Scotland's Monadhliath Mountains.

Roy and his Wildlife Foundation have been instrumental in returning ospreys to Britain as well as reintroducing white-tailed eagles in Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Wight. He had always wanted to bring the birds back to Wales but understood he needed a native Welsh champion for the project to succeed. "Eagle Reintroduction Wales really developed over a cup of tea with Roy," Sophie-lee says. That was in 2016.

THE IDEAL HABITAT

When I meet Sophie-lee at Kenfig Pool near Bridgend she enthuses about the habitat. "We've got large mature trees where the eagles can anchor themselves, and shallow waters where they hunt." I mention that we're close to Cardiff, Swansea and Bridgend but Sophie-lee isn't worried: "White-tailed eagles breed in close proximity to urban areas. We're not expecting them to nest in the centre of Cardiff! But places like this will do fine."

If the habitat's so good, however, why haven't they found their way back naturally? As well as the populations across the British Isles, there are 12,000 to 15,000 pairs of the eagles across 22 European countries and they are spreading, albeit slowly. "It's the biology of the species that prevents them from recolonising of their own accord," Sophie-lee says. "They have something called natal philopatry, which is a snazzy scientific phrase to say they're committed to their birthplaces. So they have slow-growing populations and don't

White-tails are opportunistic hunters and will follow fishing boats to scavenge the scraps

spread out much. We know that by establishing new breeding populations we can spark metapopulation mixing. For example, on the Isle of Wight when six birds were released in 2019, it sparked an international movement of youngsters. So we had a Swedish bird that we identified by its ring. And four individuals from elsewhere." The white-tails, it seems, won't settle and breed if there aren't eagles in the landscape already.

CARRION LOVING

Alternatively known as sea eagles, white-tailed eagles are birds of lakes, estuaries and wetlands where they ambush fish and wildfowl. They'll sit for hours on a vantage point, such as a tall, waterside tree, waiting for a victim.

Unlike ospreys, which also dive to catch prey with their feet, white-tailed eagle feathers aren't waterproof so they hunt in the shallows instead of diving deep. I'm curious as to what the birds will eat – especially when our waterways are so polluted. Of fish, they focus heavily on pike in freshwater and grey mullet in brackish estuaries. Both species are "extremely abundant" but the eagles will also take a wide range of waterbirds and "are very adaptable so they can take the most seasonally abundant prey," says Sophie-lee. They also relish carrion and scavenge widely.

> **"White-tails create space for rarer species"**

I'm surprised to hear the eagles will also take cormorants, goosanders and even herons. "They control the whole ecosystem," says Sophie-lee. "They reduce competition and create space for rarer, protected species. So we feel that by restoring white-tails, they have a positive impact on endangered salmon and trout."

This argument is persuasive to anglers who otherwise might have feared the impact on fish stocks. Mark Owen of the Angling Trust told me: "We believe in restoring ecological balance, a shared goal of both anglers and conservationists. The presence of white-tailed eagles could contribute

Photo: Alamy

Glamorgan's largest natural lake, Kenfig Pool is home to pike, perch and tench

to the overall protection of fish populations, as demonstrated by the positive impacts seen in other parts of Europe where they have been successfully reintroduced."

A bigger bone of contention is the allegation that eagles kill lambs – as claimed in a *Daily Telegraph* headline in October 2024 talking of 'Lamb-eating sea eagles…' in response to a separate proposal to reintroduce the birds to Cumbria.

"There's irrefutable evidence of lamb remains in white-tailed eagle nests," says Sophie-lee. However, she believes these were dead lambs, scavenged by the eagles. "When we've looked at evidence right across Europe, white-tailed eagles are breeding in lambing areas with no impacts. It's generally understood from communities living alongside them across these 22 countries that they are scavengers or fish eaters." There is one exception, as Sophie-lee admits: "Scotland is the only area where this conflict is ever reported."

To counter this, Sophie-lee points to the Isle of Wight reintroduction. Here, all released eagles have satellite tags fitted so conservationists can track their movements. It's proving vital. "A couple of days into the programme, they had a phone call off a local farmer, who said he'd lost a few sheep overnight, and also his sheepdog. And he was blaming the eagles. So the project officer visited that farmer within 24 hours, and showed the satellite tag evidence, and there was no evidence of those birds ever ranging into those areas." All the Welsh birds will be similarly fitted with tags and closely monitored.

> "Eagle tourism is popular in Scotland"

National Farmers Union (NFU) Cymru, which speaks for many Welsh famers, is yet to be convinced by Sophie-lee's case. Its Rural Affairs Board chairman, Hedd Pugh, told me: "There is a real concern that any reintroduction of this species would cause risk to animal health and welfare and have an impact on livestock production, with newborn lambs particularly at risk. There is also the unknown effect the white-tailed eagle could have on other birds, wildlife and protected species.

"Many farmers are participants in agri-environment schemes which are specifically designed to enhance wildlife on their farms," he adds. "Having a top predator like a white-tailed eagle could seriously compromise agri-environment and indeed SSSI objectives. NFU Cymru would not support the reintroduction of the white-tailed eagle in Wales."

The Farmers Union of Wales has been more receptive. It has concerns but is happy to work alongside Sophie-lee and the Welsh Government on what are called 'conflict management plans'. The spirit of cooperation is more pronounced in Ireland. Allan Mee, project manager of the Irish white-tailed eagle reintroduction, told me: "Most farmers who are familiar with the birds now understand the valuable role they play in the

Photos: Steve Sayers

LISTEN!
Find out more about Sophie-lee's campaign in episode 264 of the *BBC Countryfile Magazine* Plodcast, available on all podcast providers

> **"If I thought there was any danger, I wouldn't be releasing eagles"**

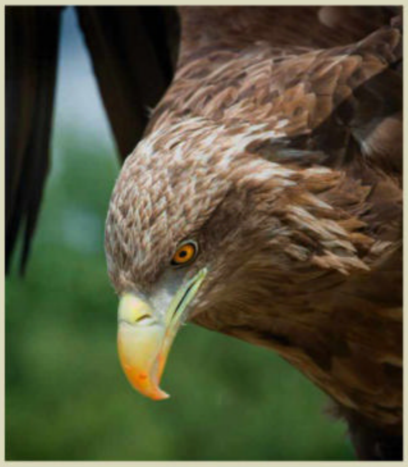
environment, including 'cleaning up' carcasses that would otherwise attract foxes and crows. The success of the project, with 64 Irish-bred eaglets fledged from nests to date, has largely been down to their acceptance by the farming community."

NRW is the government body charged with making the decision when it comes to granting the licence. It sees the case as having high public interest. In Scotland, eagle tourism is popular and an RSPB Scotland report has shown they generate up to £5 million for the economy of the Isle of Mull each year, and £2.4 million on the Isle of Skye. This could be translated to the Isle of Wight and South Wales, a positive for local economies.

When Sophie-lee has talked to the wider Welsh community there's strong support, with 91% of 3,000 people surveyed at agricultural shows supportive of the reintroduction. Though she says some fear for their pets, even their children. "I have a chihuahua," she says. "If I thought there was any danger, I wouldn't be releasing eagles!" There have never been reports of eagles attacking people.

"So we've done population modelling on what we believe that our release programme would sustain in Wales," says Sophie-lee. "By releasing between 50 and 60 birds over a five-year time frame, in 10 years' time that will establish six to 10 breeding pairs. And that would be a necessary creative sustainable population."

Sophie-lee has already identified a release site, but can't tell me where. It's simply too sensitive. But if the licence is granted, she promises to invite me to witness the moment the birds fly free. I will never see dragons in the skies above Wales, but white-tails with their mighty wingspans would be the next best thing.



THE WIGHT STUFF

White-tailed eagles were released in the Isle of Wight in 2019. Here's what happened next...

White-tailed eagles were once common in southern England but were driven to extinction through persecution. The last pair bred on the Isle of Wight in 1780. After an extensive feasibility study, the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation (RDWF) in partnership with Forestry England was granted a licence to take six eagles from Scotland, which were subsequently released on the Isle of Wight in August 2019. Sophie-lee volunteered with the eagle releases in the early days.

There were some initial setbacks when two of the young birds were found dead in suspicious circumstances – presumed poisoned – but, by the end of 2024, 37 birds have been released and there are four established territories across southern England. In 2024, one pair has raised three chicks, the first wild-bred eagles in England for 250 years. The licence allows for up to 60 eagles to be released; the RDWF hopes a steady population of 6–10 pairs will establish itself, mixing with continental birds and, if it goes ahead, birds from the ERW project.

White-tailed eagles can be seen all over the Isle of Wight but are most commonly spotted hunting over the Solent and other estuaries. They range widely and have been seen soaring over much of southern England, especially the New Forest and South Downs.

ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE

New Year GETAWAYS

Why not take advantage of this quiet season and treat yourself and a loved one – or even the whole family – to a short break. In often stunning settings with great walks from the door, the UK's rural cottages, hotels, B&Bs and holiday parks provide a much-needed dose of comfort, relaxation and exploration to suit any budget. What better way to start the new year?

A handy key to help you find accommodation that's close to...

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Image: Placebo365, iStock/Getty Images Plus

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SUFFOLK

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Fynn Valley's lodges offer a true escape for countryside lovers, where rural charm meets modern luxury just a short drive from the county town of Ipswich and its historic waterfront. Enjoy walks from your door along the picturesque river valley or travel further afield to the renowned wild areas of Suffolk, such as RSPB Minsmere. Whether you're here for a peaceful retreat or to explore the natural beauty of Suffolk, Fynn Valley Holidays provides the ultimate in self-catering indulgence.

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braceofpheasants.co.uk

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glansoch.co.uk | emma@glansoch.co.uk | 01758 712565

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Overlooking the River Leven, The Swan Hotel & Spa at Newby Bridge boasts boutique hotel rooms and suites, family suites and nest cottages – the perfect spot for any staycation. Guests can take a trip to Holte Spa to enjoy a relaxing thermal journey or select from a range of indulgent treatments to truly unwind! The Swan is also home to three fabulous eateries, plus leisure facilities such as a family pool and health club.

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Set in the beautiful Ullswater Valley just above Pooley Bridge, Hillcroft Park offers year-round and seasonal accommodation. Lodges and cottages, some with hot tubs. Glamping and camping pods, touring pitches and camping. Pets are welcome. A place to escape, make memories and enjoy precious family time.

01768 486363 | hillcroftpark.co.uk

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cadhay.org.uk

DERBYSHIRE

DARWIN FOREST

This award-winning lodge holiday park combines luxury accommodation with fantastic facilities, all located in a tranquil forest setting. It is the perfect place to stay for visiting local attractions such as Chatsworth House or as a base for exploring the miles of picturesque Derbyshire footpaths. It is pet-friendly too.

darwinforest.co.uk | 01629 732428

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boveycastle.com | 01647 445000

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monmouthshirecottages.co.uk

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oldlanwarnick.co.uk

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Come and stay on Atholl Estates, where 145,000 acres of soul-stirring landscapes, shimmering lochs, craggy peaks and ancient woodland are your playground. Hunker down in our snuggly shepherd huts in the middle of vast heather-tufted moorland, or soothe your soul in one of the scandi-style cabins at Glen Glack. With eleven unique lodges, two romantic shepherd huts and five luxury cabins, Atholl Estates has a delightful collection of hideaways perfect for any escape.

atholl-estates.co.uk/stay-with-us | 01796 481355

25 FOR 2025

Now is the time to try something different. From hiking in the hills to wild camping and seeing sharks, here are some exciting ways to expand your horizons in the year ahead

1

Set yourself a challenge

New Year's resolutions are a worthy pursuit but can often fail by February due to a lack of focus ('get fitter' being a prominent example). So how about combining your love of the countryside with a specific fitness-building goal, no matter the distance or elevation? Perhaps (re)learning how to ride a horse or swimming 100 metres non-stop in your local lido. Or kayaking to a nearby coastal island, canoeing the length of a river or finally climbing that local hill you said you'd do in 1997.

Whatever you do, make it fun, share your goal to make yourself accountable and get as many friends and family involved as possible. We'll see you at the top of Kinder Scout...

Matt Baird

Photo: Alamy

2

Go off-grid

Off-grid sleepovers in splendid isolation allow you to disconnect from everyday life and reconnect with nature. Treehouses, cabins, shepherds' huts and mountain bothies are found in soul-restoring locations, often without the internet or a phone signal. It's a great way to detox. The best locations take some effort to reach, but it's worth it. **Helen Moat**

3

Build a garden

Countryfile launched Plant Britain in 2020 to promote community gardens and wildflower planting in an effort to help combat climate change, aid wildlife and pollinators, while boosting our wellbeing. Four years on, nearly 2,000,000 plantings have taken place. The scheme has ended but the benefits of community gardens still shine, from growing urban herb gardens to planting wildflower meadows and adding planters to shared balconies. **Matt Baird**

4

Engage with nature

There's no better way to engage with nature than to volunteer with a citizen science project. Gather information on pollinating insects, bees, butterflies and moths with the UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme (PoMS). Simply download the app and find your patch. Monitoring wildlife ensures you focus on the present moment, making it the perfect mindfulness exercise.

Through the Wildlife Trusts, you can find a project close to you, whether that's researching on the intertidal shores of the Solent, reptile reporting in Cheshire or hedgehog hunting in Cumbria. Search your location on their website to find local opportunities (wildlifetrusts.org).

You can take part in the world's largest garden wildlife survey from home; the RSPB's annual Big Garden Birdwatch is back on 24–26 January (rspb.org.uk).

Do you love walking in forests? Help the Woodland Trust map its Ancient Tree Inventory by recording the girth, species and location of a veteran near you (woodlandtrust.org.uk). Or, if you live near the coast, take part in a beach clean with the Marine Conservation Society (mcsuk.org). With the wind in your face as you chat with other litter-pickers, you'll feel the health benefits. The National Trust also has volunteering opportunities on conservation projects in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (nationaltrust.org.uk).

Working in the outdoors while forging new friendships is invaluable in our fast-paced world. **Helen Moat**

5

Spot marine life

Watching a pod of dolphins slicing gracefully through the sea is a delight. Britain's bottlenose dolphins are found in estuaries, bays and harbours. In Cardigan Bay in Wales and Scotland's Moray Firth, large populations of dolphins may be spotted close to the shore. There's a particularly good chance of seeing them in the Firth from the narrow peninsula at Chanonry Point.

Smaller common dolphins can also be spotted from our shores; they sometimes ride the bow waves of boats, showing off their energetic acrobatic displays. Head to the Isle of Man for a chance to see both dolphin species.

The best chance of spotting basking sharks is in the Hebrides, off the north-west coast of Scotland, or around Devon and Cornwall between May and October as they bask in the sun or feed on plankton. In the summer, humpback whales migrate from Africa to Shetland. Minke whales are also seen in Scottish waters in warmer months. But seeing one of these impressive sea mammals is down to good luck and a large dose of patience.

As these giants of the marine world become increasingly endangered, do your part by volunteering with Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) (uk.whales.org). It's possible to get involved with education work at WDC wherever you live. At the Scottish Dolphin Centre, Spey Bay (dolphincentre.whales.org) you can become a short-term residential volunteer, giving guided tours and talks.

If you encounter a beached whale or dolphin, call the British Divers Marine Life Rescue straight away (01825 765546). **Helen Moat**

6

Be a farmer

Become part of the WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) community, either as a host or participant. This initiative, in the UK and 130 countries worldwide, links visitors with organic farmers to promote both educational and cultural exchanges of ecological farming practices. Food and board are provided in exchange for your participation in the farming activities of your hosts. Children are also welcome in some projects (wwoof.org.uk/en/). **Matt Baird**

7

See ospreys

Witnessing an osprey hunt for fish is an unforgettable sight. But where's best to catch them in full flight? No RSPB reserve is more synonymous with a single type of bird than Loch Garten in the Cairngorms. Ospreys can also be seen at the Loch of the Lowes in Perthshire, Leighton Moss in Lancashire, Cors Dyfi in Powys, Manton Bay in Rutland, and RSPB Arne in Dorset. **Matt Baird**

Photos: Alamy; Alex Mustard/naturepl.com

8

Sit down

The TikTok-savvy among you may have noticed the ‘sport’ of ‘raw-dogging’, which finds the protagonist doing little but stare at the in-flight map on a plane. Yet there’s a rural equivalent, detailed in Simon Barnes’ *Rewild Yourself*, where you find a spot in a field, woods or park, sit down and… do nothing. Once you overcome the urge to check your messages, talk or fidget, nature will come to you. Next stop? Extreme sitting competitions (yes, these are real). **Matt Baird**

9

Walk at night

Night walks don’t just open up a world of stars while our planet is under a mantle of darkness; when vision is obscured our other senses gain precedence. We become more attuned to the sounds around us: the crunch of leaves underfoot or the babble of a stream. Deer come out to drink at ponds. Badgers emerge from their setts. Bats flitter overhead. It’s a magical experience, but be sure to stay safe. **Helen Moat**

10

Overcome a fear

Fearing crossing a bridge? You’re not the only one; acrophobia, or the fear of heights, came in as the number one phobia in a 2023 YouGov survey with 23% of participants saying it affects them. Around 21% reported that they feared spiders (arachnophobia). Even clowns scared 3% – but why?

The main reason we have such extreme reactions is down to survival. If, for instance, in times gone by you didn’t fear a poisonous spider, you’d allow it to crawl all over you before it became hungry and sunk its teeth in. Death would await. Fear the spider and your breathing and heart rate increases, your blood pumps your muscles with oxygen and off you scarper.

Our biological fears are rooted in the brain, involving the amygdala and the medial prefrontal cortex. When a threat is detected, the amygdala activates the ‘fight-or-flight’ response. You’re physically primed to react. But then your brain passes the information to the prefrontal cortex, which helps contextualise fear responses, allowing for more adaptive behaviours in response to threats. Like, for 97% of us, not running from Krusty the Clown. But, how do you overcome a fear? One method is ‘exposure therapy’, where you face gradual and repeated exposure to the source of your fear and then, with the help of a professional, retrain your thoughts to manage this anxiety. For instance, if you fear being trapped in a lift, your therapy may progress from viewing pictures of lifts, to going near a lift, to stepping into a lift. Breathing exercises can also help you control your nervous system.

So prime yourself by gazing at images of bridges and mountains – you’ll soon be calmly scaling those heights. **James Witts**

11

Up your adrenaline

I'm standing upon a jagged outcrop that dates back 370 million years to the fittingly-named Devonian Period. The Atlantic Ocean menacingly lies five metres beneath my feet. "Jump!" shouts Simon Hope of North Devon Coasteering (northdevoncoasteering.com). I oblige, leaping into the swell before a wave sweeps me into a gully where a set of natural rapids await.

This is my first attempt at coasteering for 20 years and I'm questioning what I've been doing in the interlude. Like an adrenaline-fuelled version of rock pooling, it's exhilarating and educational, testing my physical and mental limits, while informing me about the history of Croyde's coastline and the sea's behaviour, and offering a humbling reminder of the power of the ocean. Yet I feel safe throughout, aided by Simon's expertise and the instant sense of community developed by our small band of coasteerers. We exit invigorated after two hours in the ocean, its tunnels and outcrops, into the warm embrace of a pasty and cup of tea. Pure coastal bliss.

Coasteering is just one age-agnostic coastal activity that can be enjoyed no matter your skill level, with surfing (both stand-up and bodyboarding), kitesurfing, skimboarding and sea kayaking also in the mix. You'll see the sea as you've never seen it before. **Matt Baird**

12

Wild camp

Treehouses and bothies offer an enthralling escape into the wilderness, but the ultimate off-grid stay is wild camping. It's legal in the wilds of Scotland and permitted on Dartmoor (you'll need permission from the landowner in England, Northern Ireland and Wales). Breathe in the scent of moorland, listen to the roar of a stag or watch the stars. Look for a flat, dry and sheltered spot, and leave no trace. **Helen Moat**

13

Find a source

Going back to where it begins to discover the source of a river can be a rich experience, especially when you compare that trickle, spring or stream beneath your feet to the great estuaries and channels that form down-river. It's not always easy, however, and can involve some map-reading prowess. But, once you've ticked-off the Tay or Trent, you'll soon be a river source-finding expert. Next stop, the Nile! **Matt Baird**

Photos: Alamy, Joseph Branston

14

Go car-free

Being stuck in traffic is no fun for the motorist or the planet. A car-free holiday is the answer – pack light and let public transport take the strain. See the delights of Wales with the Explore Wales Pass. For £149 for an adult and £74.50 for a child (with other railcards reducing the cost further), you can enjoy unlimited travel on all Transport For Wales trains and selected bus routes for any four days in an eight-day period (tfw.wales). **Nige Wilder**

15

Hire a boat

Taking a break on a canal boat allows you to visit the unhurried world Britain's waterways offer. There's a wide variety of routes on which to steer your hired vessel, from the straight lines of the British canal network to rivers or the Norfolk Broads. No experience is required, nor is a driving licence. Full tuition will be given by the hire company, along with an overview of the rules. All aboard! **Nige Wilder**

16

Delve into history

Getting your hands dirty on an archaeological dig excavating layers of history has always been alluring to those keen to learn more about the past. One of the best ways to get involved is to join your local branch of the Council for British Archaeology (archaeologyuk.org) which organises digs across the country.

Mudlarking involves searching for historical treasures in the mud revealed by the receding waters of tidal rivers. The Thames has been a primary destination for mudlarks since the 18th century, but a licence from the Port of London Authority is required before you can search the foreshore. Fast-moving tides make it a hobby not without its dangers, but novices can gain safety tips on a guided walk organised by Thames Discovery Programme (mola.org.uk/tdp).

Many mudlarks use metal detectors. To unleash your inner Mackenzie Crook, though, you must abide by strict laws. Permission to detect is needed from the landowner, ideally in writing. Also, many parts of the landscape are out of bounds to detectorists, including Sites of Scientific Special Interest and scheduled historic monuments, such as stone circles, hillforts and castles. The National Council for Metal Detecting has further details (ncmd.co.uk). **Nige Wilder**

17

Gaze at the stars

Scientists say this winter we'll have reached 'solar maximum' – the peak of the sun's 11-year solar cycle when visibility of the aurora borealis, or northern lights is at its height. The further north you travel, the better your chances of seeing the northern lights in 2025. The islands of Shetland, Orkney and the Outer Hebrides, plus Caithness and Cairngorms National Park on the mainland, are all good bets.

Winter is best for aurora spotting, when skies are darkest; the best time is around midnight. Use an app to find out where and when solar activity is optimal. Seeing the electric waves of yellow, blue, green, pink and mauve is a thrilling experience – even if it's just through the lens of a camera.

Head to a dark sky location for stargazing walks. Six of Britain's national parks have been awarded International Dark Sky Reserve status: Exmoor, Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons), South Downs (Moore's Reserve), Eryri (Snowdonia), North York Moors and the Yorkshire Dales (nationalparks.uk/dark-skies/).

Learn to read the sky map of our winter constellations including Orion (the hunter), Gemini, Perseus and Ursa Major (the big dipper). Track the moon as it waxes and wanes over a month of stargazing rambles and search for planets visible with the naked eye: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. **Helen Moat**

18

Be an extra

Imagine a sideline where you get to earn pocket money while spending time in the great outdoors plus the chance of rubbing shoulders with the stars. That's what working as an extra on a TV production or film set can offer. One day you might re-enact an historic battle, the next you could be in a stately garden filming *Bridgerton*. No prior experience or formal training is needed. Simply have some photographs taken, sign up to an agency and look out for casting calls. **Nige Wilder**

19

Find a festival

Folk festivals and farming shows are true fixtures of Britain's cultural calendar. Among the best are the Shetland Folk Festival (1–4 May), Cambridge Folk Festival (31 July–3 Aug) and Fairport's Cropredy Convention in Oxfordshire (7–9 Aug). Top agricultural shows include the Great Yorkshire Show (8–11 July) and the Royal Welsh Show (21–24 July). **Nige Wilder**

Photos: Alamy

20

Go foraging

Whether it's down to a yearning to connect with nature, eat more seasonal foods or just to save a bit of cash on wild garlic, foraging is a fun and exciting activity for all the family. If you're wanting to forage now, the berries and nuts of autumn are long gone, but winter greens such as hairy bittercress, chickweed and nettles are widely available. As ever, take along a reliable ID guide, pick responsibly, take only what you need and never eat anything you're unsure about. **Matt Baird**

21

Pick grapes

If you've ever gazed over rows of vines imagining yourself as a vintner toasting another successful harvest, why not try a taster of the lifestyle in the harvest month of October? Over 100 UK vineyards welcome volunteer pickers, and many offer a sample of the end product, too. Go to winecellardoor.co.uk to find a list of vineyards looking for harvest help.
Margaret Bartlett

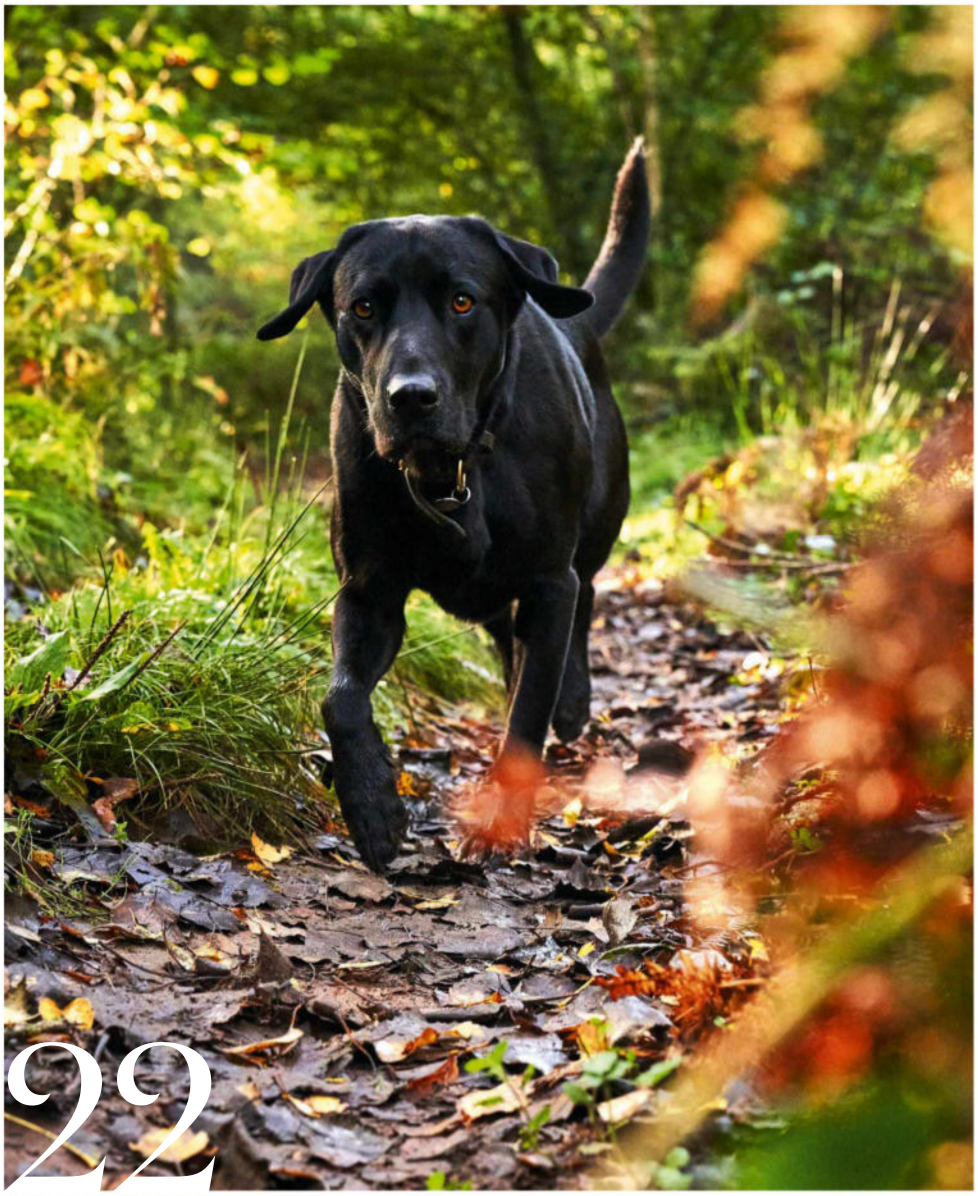
Take better photos of your dog

Photographing dogs is a rewarding experience, but it can also be tricky. Whether you're a professional photographer or a pet lover looking to capture precious moments with your furry friend, getting the perfect shot requires patience, skill and a few handy techniques.

One of the most important tips in dog photography is to shoot from their eye level. This creates a more intimate and engaging perspective. Whether they're sitting, playing or lying down, getting to their height helps to capture their true character and makes the viewer feel like they're part of the action.

Natural light, especially outdoors, is your best friend. Golden hour (the hour after sunrise and the hour before sunset) is ideal for warm, flattering light that brings out the texture and colour of your dog's fur. Use a fast shutter speed to freeze their movement, especially when they're running or playing. Aim for at least 1/1000th of a second to ensure crisp shots. Ensure the focus is sharp on their eyes to give your images a sense of connection. If the eyes are out of focus, the entire photo might feel off.

After the shoot, editing is essential to bring out the best in your photos. Lightly enhance the contrast and sharpness, and brighten the eyes if needed. Keep your editing subtle and natural to highlight your pet's true charm. **Steve Sayers**



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23

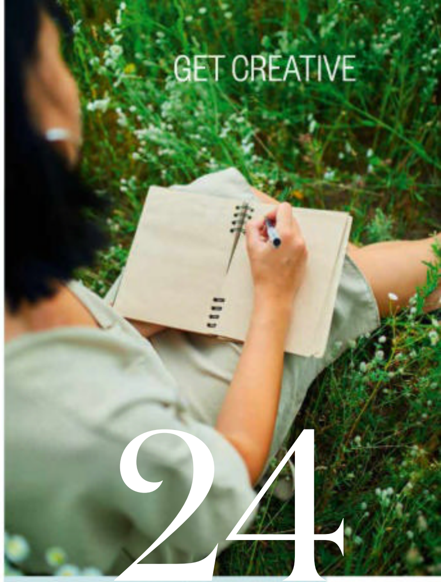
Learn a native language

At least 10 native languages are spoken in Britain. Among them are sign languages, traveller tongues including Angloromani and Shelta, and Scots and its derivatives such as Doric, which is related to Friesian and Norwegian and spoken in Aberdeenshire. Others are the legacy of Celtic-language-speaking peoples who were divided when Anglo-Saxons colonised the land that became known as England.

Subsequently, the closely related Cymraeg (Welsh) and Kernewek (Cornish), and the inter-related Ghàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic), Gaeilge (Irish Gaelic) and Gaelg (Manx) evolved separately. Yet unlike most of the global population, England itself is largely monoglot, despite language-learning being beneficial. Science shows advantages of learning a language include delayed onset of dementia and better concentration and memory. Communication skills and empathy also improve, benefiting learners and speakers alike.

Native languages also complement cultural understanding. Drawing on my own experience of learning Cymraeg (Welsh) on moving to Cymru (Wales), my landscape comprehension has improved. Welsh natural history burst into life as I discovered that over 200 Welsh place names refer to wolves. Cymraeg has also improved my relationship with the rural community. Yet, as with native languages elsewhere, and although Cymraeg is taught in schools, it's spoken less in public places as newcomers are accommodated.

If you live where a native language is spoken, ask your local library about classes and resources. If you wish to learn from afar, Duolingo offers courses in Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, or try websites such as **gocornish.org** and **learnmanx.com**. Mix it up with children's books, radio and subtitled television. But nothing beats a pint with a patient native-language-speaking friend. Amdani! (Let's go!) **Julie Brominicks**



24

Try a journal

Nothing deepens your connection with the natural world quite like keeping a nature journal. Whether you write, draw, paint or collect leaves and flowers to stick to your pages, scientific studies show the act of slowing down, observing and recording your experiences of nature has profound wellbeing benefits. Try a journal with exercises and seasonal tips, such as *Homecoming* by Melissa Harrison (W&N, £20). **Margaret Bartlett**

25

Learn a craft

Will this be the year you find your creative mojo? Whether you're fascinated by basket weaving, want to try printmaking, adore carving wood, or are keen to make natural dyes, this is the time to work with your head, hands and heart to learn a new skill. Try an online course or, if you can, an in-person workshop. Go to **findacraft.co.uk** or **craftcourses.com** to connect with craftspeople offering workshops near you. **Margaret Bartlett** CF

Photo: Alamy, Steve Sayers

Scotland's gentle giant

If deerhounds look like something out of medieval legend, that's because they may be the oldest dog breed in Britain. **James Fair** reveals the history of these elegant canines

The first known reference to a dog said to be a Scottish deerhound goes back to the 16th-century history book *Holinshed's Chronicles* – the source of many of Shakespeare's greatest plays – and a story it tells that dates back more than 1,700 years, to 288CE. In many ways, it is the shaggy dog story to end all shaggy dog stories.

Some Pictish nobles much admired the dogs owned by King Crathlint, leader of the Scots. Over what sounds like several days of hunting and feasting with the Scots (well, "making merie", Holinshed reports – we may only imagine what this involved), the Picts had observed that Crathlint's dogs far excelled theirs in "fairnesse, swiftnesse [and] hardinesse".

Such was their admiration, Thomas Brown relates in his 1829 work, *Biographical Sketches and Authentic Anecdotes of Dogs*, the king gave them both "dogs and bitches", but being "not so contented", they stole another they particularly liked the look of.

This, it turned out, was a bad move – old King Crathlint clearly cared for his canine companions more than the green-eyed Picts could have expected. Crathlint's "master of the leash" pursued the thieves and – reading between the lines – tried to persuade them to return the cherished hound, but they instead ran him through with their "horsespeares". There followed a series of tit-for-tat killings which resulted in the deaths of 60 Scottish nobles (and a great many commoners, though this clearly didn't matter as much) and some 100 Picts.

> **"They were lean, lugubrious and grizzled"**

But what were these remarkable animals that sparked such a murderous internecine conflict? Well, if they were anything like the modern breed, they were lean, lugubrious and grizzled, standing 75cm tall at the shoulder and with a sad and mournful gaze. The Official Standard for the breed, drawn up in 1892, is more than 1,000 words long and contains detailed information on what the head, ears, neck, body, legs, feet, tail and coat should be like.

"Eyes: Should be dark – generally dark brown, brown or hazel. A very light eye is not liked. The eye should be moderately full, with a soft look in repose, but a keen, far away look when the Deerhound is roused," it recommends. Sir Walter Scott, no less, was their number one admirer, calling them "the most perfect creature of heaven".

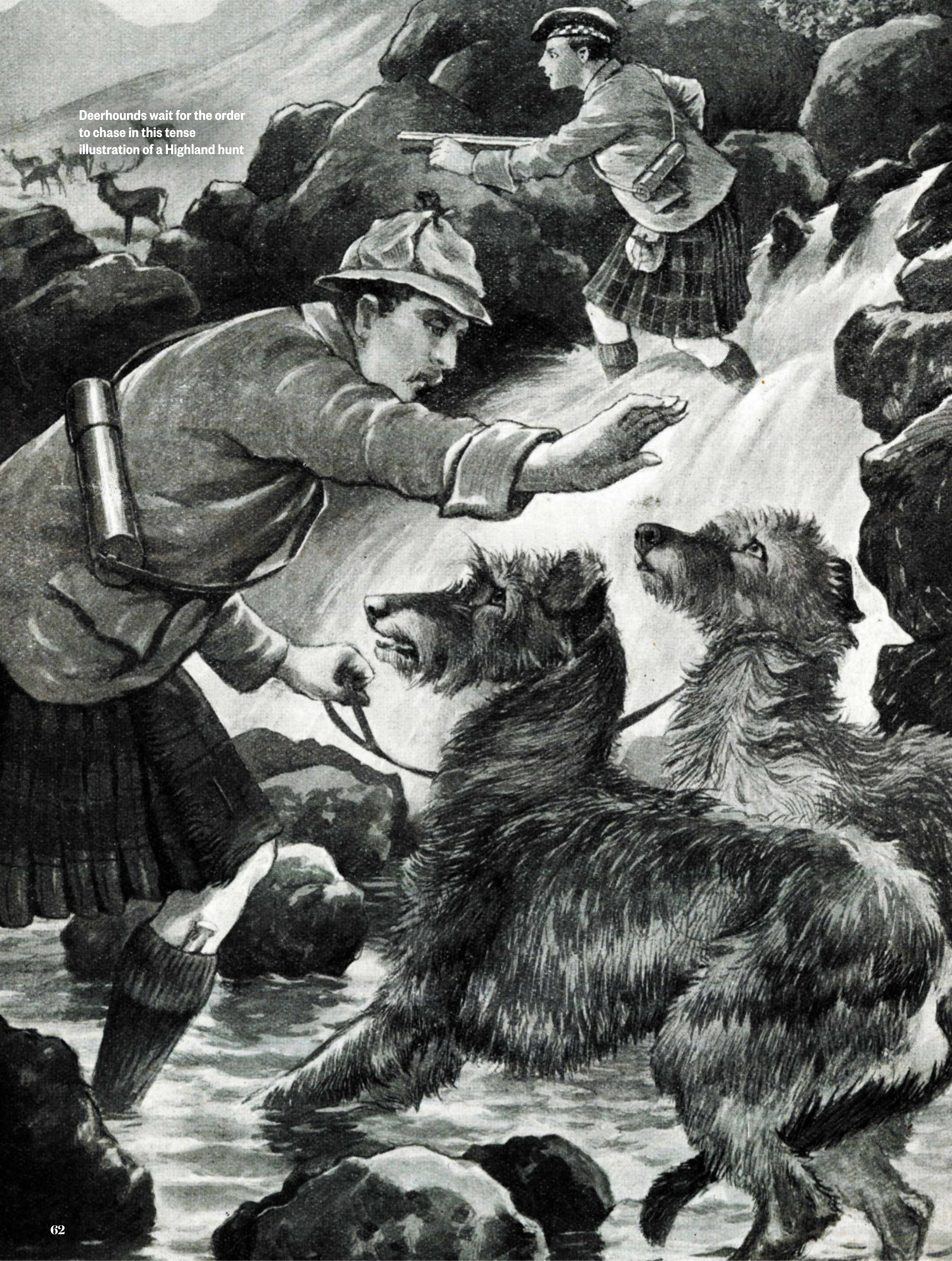
MYSTERIOUS ORIGINS

We cannot know for sure if Crathlint's dogs were deerhounds, though it seems likely they were kept as hunting animals. The true origins of the breed are, as Q Van Hummel writes in *The American Book of the Dog* in 1891, "shrouded in mystery". They are variously referred to as "Scotch" and "rough greyhounds" and "Scottish" and "Highland deerhounds", and finally just deerhounds.

It's often said that the earliest hard evidence for the existence of deerhounds survives in the form of the Hilton of Cadboll stone, which was carved around 800CE in Cromarty in north-east Scotland. Its middle panel

Photo: Alamy

Tall, lean and speedy, deerhounds were hugely popular as deer coursers up until the 18th century, when hunters started to use guns instead



Deerhounds wait for the order to chase in this tense illustration of a Highland hunt depicts a deer being chased by two horseman and two large dogs, usually interpreted as being deerhounds.

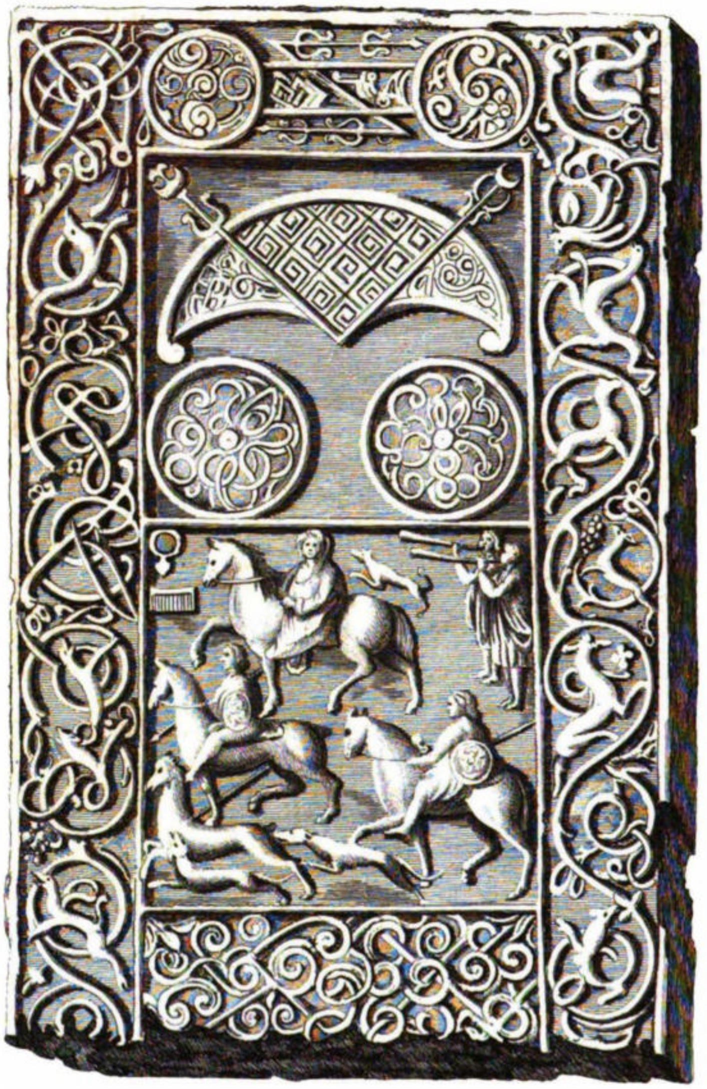
Up to the 1800s, we know that deerhounds were used to hunt deer, as their name suggests. In *A Handbook of Deer-stalking*, published in 1880 by one Alexander Macrae, we even have some idea of how this was done, though he laments they "are now very much out of fashion" at this time.

Rather than letting the dog pursue deer from above, which actually gives the prey the advantage because they are better at running downhill over broken ground, Macrae says, you release it from below its quarry. "When slipped from below, the deer is more or less exhausted before the dog comes up to him, and the dog is all the better for getting a little warm by the time the deer turns from the hill." Don't be too close, Macrae also advises, or too far away. "Unless a dog can take a deer in three or four minutes, he will not take him at all," we learn.

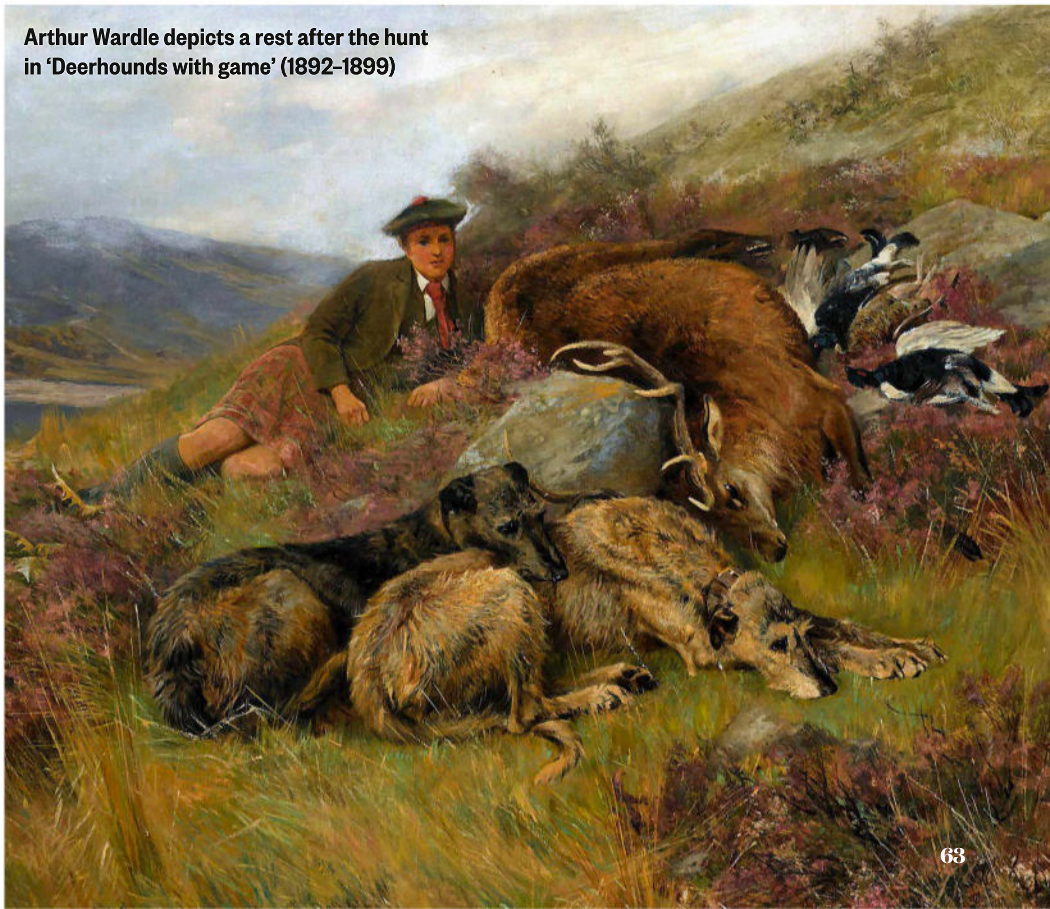
"He can run fast enough to catch an antelope"

But the breed was dying out at this time, and it was only saved because the English got involved – leading figures such as Sir Walter Scott and even Queen Victoria were champions. It was around this time, says Deerhound Club president Mary Girling, that the 'Scottish' moniker was dropped from the breed name. In the US, however, it still retains its Scottish appellation, because so many Scots emigrated to North America, taking their dogs with them.

Indeed, across the pond in the old colonies, where, unlike in Britain, large and dangerous predators still roamed, the deerhound's ability as a hunting animal was still greatly appreciated in the late 19th century. "He can run fast enough to catch an antelope, a jack-rabbit, coyote, wolf, deer or elk," says Van Hummel. "He



The hunting scene on the Hilton of Cadboll Stone may be a Pictish allegory for conversion to Christianity



Arthur Wardle depicts a rest after the hunt in 'Deerhounds with game' (1892-1899)

Photos: Alamy

Deerhound owners report their dogs are friendly and affectionate, and generally prefer lying down to standing

> **"Roosevelt loved the dog's courage and ability to hunt that most reviled of creatures – the wolf"**

will tree a mountain lion or a black bear, and will even fight a grizzly long enough for you to climb a tree or get off a good distance."

Theodore Roosevelt, US president in the first decade of the 20th century, writes extensively about deerhounds, greyhounds and other similar dogs. And it appears that despite his reputation as a conservationist, Roosevelt especially loved the dog's courage and ability to hunt that most reviled of creatures – the wolf.

Roosevelt writes gushingly, for example, of the Sun River Hound Club of Montana, whose greyhounds and deerhounds reputedly killed 146 wolves in 1886 alone. One story he repeats concerned two deerhounds cornering a large wolf and striking him "like stones hurled from a catapult, throwing him as they fastened on his throat and strangled him before he could rise".

All of which makes deerhounds sound like the most unsuitable pets, but speak to anyone who's ever owned one (and if they've had one, they've probably had a dozen), and you'll wonder if Roosevelt didn't dream up this tale from his fevered imagination.

DEERHOUNDS AT HOME

They are sweet-tempered, charming and tolerant pets, according to Mary Girling, who acquired her first deerhound in 1969. She currently has "two ancient ones" and a youngster which are allowed to run free in the meadow she owns where she lives on the Essex coast. After exercise, they settle down to sleep on a sofa or by the fireside. "They are happy to be couch potatoes," Mary says.

But why such devotion to the breed, I wonder? Mary has owned them for more than half a century. She explains how their ears are said to be "like a mouse's coat to the touch" and their lovely eyes don't stare back at you too boldly. "Part of their appeal is their faraway look."

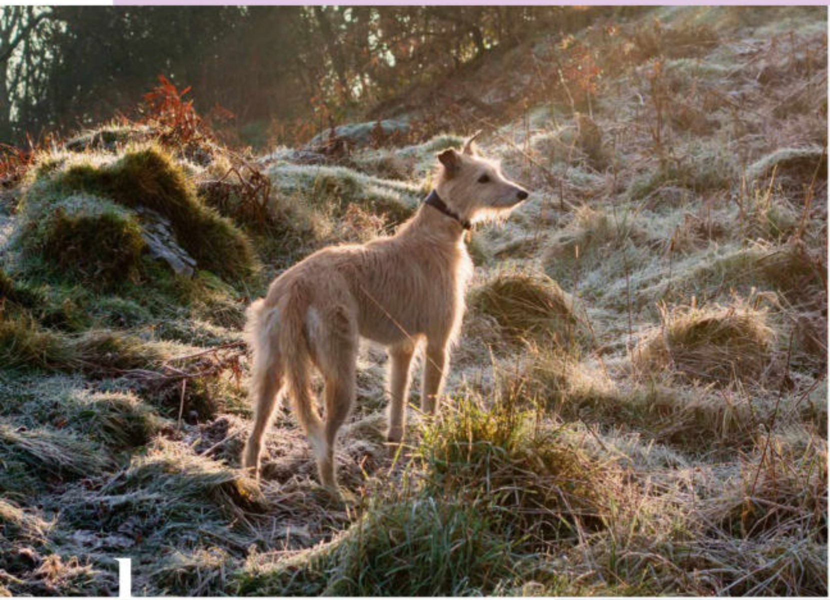
But they are big dogs weighing up to 40–45kg, and – as with many breeds of a similar size – their popularity has been slowly falling in recent decades. The Deerhound Club has 600 members, and about 300 births are registered on an annual basis, which is just enough to keep the breed from becoming a mere footnote in Holinshed's histories. Prices, as with many dogs, have risen astronomically – Mary paid £25 for her first one, but they are more like £2,000 these days.

Vanessa Lucas, the Deerhound Club's honorary secretary, is a relative novice compared to Mary, having only been an owner for the past 23 years. "I've only got four dogs at the moment," she says, before admitting, "They are very addictive.

"What do you get back from a dog?" she adds. "You get up in the morning and you think, 'Great, I'm going to take the dogs for a run on the Downs'. What a great start to the day." CF

James Fair is an environmental journalist specialising in wildlife and controversial conservation issues.
jamesfairwildlife.co.uk

Deerhounds & sighthounds



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Deerhounds are part of a group of hunting dogs known as sighthounds. They include a number of instantly recognised breeds and some that are hardly known at all.

3. Irish wolfhounds are large dogs that can stand 85cm at the shoulder. Though there are references to Irish wolfhound-type dogs going back to Roman times, the breed today was created by crossing Scottish deerhounds with great danes.

1. Lurchers are produced by crossbreeding a sighthound – usually a greyhound but it doesn't have to be – with a herding dog such as a collie or a terrier. They are associated with poaching, but also make good pets.

4. Whippets are smaller versions of the greyhound, associated in popular culture with men in flat caps drinking warm beer in pubs with sawdust on the floor. Like greyhounds, whippets are popular and affectionate family pets.

2. Greyhounds are the best-known sighthound, bred for hunting deer and later hare coursing. They are said to be the world's fastest dog, capable of running at a speed of 72km (45 miles) an hour.

5. Longdogs, like lurchers, are a mixed breed, but in this case a hybrid between two sighthounds. A greyhound crossed with a whippet, for example, would combine the speed of the former with the greater agility of the latter.

Photos: **Alamy**

THE PRINCE ALBERT

Visually beautiful, the three-part BBC Three series *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country* showcases stunning landscapes

Labour of love

The star of *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country* is brilliantly placed to bring the real British countryside to the small screen, discovers **Nige Tassell** over a cuppa with the award-winning actor and writer

If Charlie Cooper wanted anonymity after his BAFTA-winning televisual success, to be invisible to the general public, he's going the wrong way about it.

On this Tuesday morning, in the centre of the Gloucestershire town of Nailsworth, the actor/writer is driving his mustard-yellow decommissioned AA van back and forth, searching for a space to park. "Why's it so busy today?" he asks through his open window, a little exasperated. "It's never normally like this."

Not only is the van itself decidedly conspicuous and unmissable, but everyone round here knows Charlie is behind the wheel, thanks to the vehicle's starring role in his latest TV series, *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country*. The show finds the 35-year-old driving around Britain to dig a little deeper into these isles' many strange folk tales. In the first series, he travels to East Anglia in search of the legendary phantom dog Black Shuck, to Wiltshire to seek out the truth behind the crop circle phenomenon, and to South Wales to prove the existence of King Arthur.

Parking space finally located, Charlie joins me in a local café where, in its rear garden over a cappuccino and croissant, he traces his Cotswolds upbringing – and thus also that of his sister Daisy May, his co-writer and co-star of the mockumentary *This Country*. This was the sitcom that made their names, thanks to their portrayal of the bored, directionless cousins Kurtan and Kerry Mucklowe.

"We grew up right in the middle of Cirencester," explains Charlie, "so we thought of ourselves more as townies than country folk, but we still felt the boredom and isolation. We'd spend most evenings swinging each other around in shopping trolleys in the Tesco car park. But putting all those frustrations into *This Country* was a cathartic experience. As soon as we wrote the show, I was suddenly at peace with where I was from and where I live. And I love it now. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

For Charlie and Daisy, *This Country* was a chance to show the flipside of country life, a version that you'd never see in a rural-set Richard Curtis rom-com. "Even here in the Cotswolds, you have places of real affluence and money, and then tucked away around the back of the village is the housing estate where the poorer people live. These are the places people don't go and don't see. Daisy and I always want to be specific in our work, to find the detail and the truth. Writing *This Country* was a deep dive into what it's really like in rural communities."

ROAD CLOSED

The sunshine-yellow de-commissioned AA van is a co-star in *Myth Country*

After the mockumentary came the documentary. But *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country* is far from a po-faced investigation into British folklore. "We didn't want to make a straightforward documentary," explains Charlie, "with me looking down the barrel of the camera. I wanted to make it fun and light-hearted and a bit ramshackle." He breaks off a piece of his croissant. "I'm using my old AA van, so it's certainly ramshackle. It's a fine line tonally. We want it to be factual enough and intriguing enough that people learn something, but we can't take anything too seriously. There has to be a degree of scepticism as well."

IN SEARCH OF HERITAGE

The factual elements came from a cast of fascinating experts, among them Lucy Pringle, a leading authority on crop circles. "What an amazing character she is. That's what's so nice about the show. It's more about these characters than it is about the legends or the folklore – the people who are so passionate about what they believe in. I could listen to Lucy Pringle for hours."

The series was a chance for Charlie to indulge his interest in folklore, a subject that's been a presence in his life since he was a kid when he and Daisy "were obsessed by going to summer fêtes and village fairs. I've always tried to weave folklore into writing projects, but it just felt like the right time to do something like this. For starters, it meant I didn't have to write a script for six months. And, having two young kids, I was only away for three days for each episode.

"I'd never thought about doing something unscripted, but I was totally following my nose. And because I was coming at it from a point of wonder, it never felt like work. I loved every second of it. We had a small crew and no budget, but we had the best time. It was a labour of love and I hope that comes across to people."

While acknowledging the substantial online folklore community, Charlie believes the times are right for the wider population to dig deeper into their heritage. "People have a certain view of British folklore – that it's trivial and belongs to the past. It's not.

A confirmed fan of the TV series *Detectorists*, Charlie found a new enthusiasm for metal detecting following the filming of *Myth Country*

In South Wales, Charlie gets his hands dirty seeking evidence of the legendary King Arthur

Wherever you go – in every town, in every village – something significant will have happened there. And with that comes really rich folklore.

"As a country, there's so much to be proud about, especially in a time when there is a bit of a national identity crisis. We don't quite know who we are or where we've come from. Cheese-rolling and shin-kicking and wassailing – that's true British culture. It's pure and it's innocent and it's about community. And it came from the peasants. It was about taking back control from the ruling classes, about doing their own thing outside of the people who owned the land. I love that."

FILLING THE VOID

The series will hopefully also help viewers appreciate the natural landscape, in the same way that the gorgeous cinematography of equally charming programmes such as *Gone Fishing* and *Detectorists* has done. Charlie nods. "There's a void in our lives. We're totally disconnected from nature and our environment because we're spending more hours indoors. So when people see a nice drone shot of a wheatfield, it's 'Oh, wow!'. Go out and walk through a wheatfield then!

"How many people can truly recognise the changing of the seasons? For the first time, we don't need to know about the seasons to get our food. We go to the supermarket to get everything. I'm not saying that folklore is the answer to all our problems, but it can go a long way in helping people to reconnect with nature, to find a sense of belonging in their landscape."

So, will *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country* do for folklore what *Detectorists* did for metal detecting? To what extent have you energised others to buy up a decommissioned AA van and follow in your tyre tracks? "If it inspires just one person to explore their local stone circle or English Heritage site, that's amazing. It's so good for your wellbeing. And it's a gateway to so many other things – history, nature, whatever."

In November, Charlie was back in the campervan, heading down the M5 to Ottery St Mary in Devon. Here he filmed part of the show's Christmas special as the local residents carried flaming tar barrels through the town's streets. "If we get another series, there are so many places I definitely want to go. I'd love to go to Orkney. I'd love to do something about the mythology of the sea. I'd love to go to Ireland. I'd love to do something about Lindisfarne and St Cuthbert… It's just endless."

> "Folklore can help people find a sense of belonging"

Charlie downs the last of his cappuccino, before revealing how the show has changed his own life, particularly after the treasure-seeking King Arthur episode.

"I have become obsessed with metal detecting. It is the best thing. I've bought a detector and I've gone to a few rallies. Last week I found a silver hammered coin in my sister's garden. It was from the time of King John, so 800 years ago. It would have been the first time that it had been touched since then. It gives you a completely different perspective on life and death; a reminder that we're on this planet for a really brief amount of time. You think about the person who lost that coin. What were they going to buy with it? And who, in 800 years, is going to find what I leave behind?"

In Daisy's garden, all in the same small patch of ground, Charlie's detector also found a Tudor buckle, a medieval crotal bell for a horse and a musket ball. Was his sister delighted at the mini-hoard he'd unearthed from under her lawn? A hollow laugh. "She was raging. There were holes everywhere. I'm not allowed back…" CF

BBC iPLAYER Watch *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country* on BBC iPlayer.

Nige Tassell is a journalist and author who writes about popular culture, travel and sport.

Photos: Roger Keller/FremantleMedia Ltd/Naked West, Jona Jacob/FremantleMedia Ltd/Naked West

Stuns'ls
Sea Shanty Group
BREWERY

The Stuns'ls shanty group takes to the stage at the Mevagissey Shanty Festival in Cornwall

Wave of popularity

As the Mevagissey Shanty Festival draws in the crowds, the resurgence of this seafaring folk-song tradition shows no signs of waning. **James Witts** seeks the 'drunken sailor' in Cornwall

Photos: **Remy Whiting**

Narrow streets and colourful fisherman's cottages roll down to the centre of Mevagissey, where a twin harbour, built off the back of the thriving pilchard industry of the 18th and 19th centuries, shelters a flotilla of working fishing boats and pleasure craft secured to land by rusty chains.

Seaweed-scarred buoys bobble and worn lobster pots await their next outing while the scent of pasties drifts across the madding tourist crowd. It's a classic seaside image that couldn't be more Kernow if it tried. But then it does try. Harder. And effortlessly, as a deep harmony of male voices interrupts the squawking of seagulls.

> **"Seaweed-scarred buoys bobble while the scent of pasties drifts across the madding tourist crowd"**

"First thing in the morning, on
Chapel Carn Brea. To gaze at the
Scillies, in the blue far away. For this is
my Cornwall, and I'll tell you why.
Because I was born here and here I
shall die..."

It's mid-October, I'm on the south coast of Cornwall for the sixth Mevagissey Shanty Festival and that was 'Cornwall My Home', a modern shanty popularised by the group Fisherman's Friends. This is my maiden musical voyage and I'm here because of new and old: a blossoming love of shanty and a lifelong attraction to England's rugged south-western tip. My wife, friends and I will spend the weekend in the harbour celebrated chef Rick Stein called the "prettiest in Cornwall, if not the UK", discovering more about the enduring appeal of sea shanties and Mevagissey.

The village certainly has a past. Legend has it that locals hung a monkey, believing it to be a Napoleonic spy. I suspect that's apocryphal as I've heard similar about Hartlepool. There are definite historic truths, however. Its name derives from two villages either side of the harbours. They were named after Celtic saints, St Mevan and St Issey. Over time, they joined by the Cornish word for 'and' (hag) to become Mevagissey. Legend goes it was the first town in Cornwall to be lit by electric streetlamps, the energy coming from a local power station built in 1895 and fuelled by pilchard oil.

The original generator for the streetlamps is now a toilet block, which will prove a popular pitstop over this three-day event that welcomes around 70 shanty groups from all over the world. They'll sing in one or more of 14 venues, from pubs and social clubs to the Mevagissey Museum and even a fish and chip shop. A free shuttle bus will transfer them and their audiences to nearby Pentewan, which houses two further venues.

The beating heart of the festival is a marquee, aka the Keltek Stage after its local brewery sponsors. It's positioned on the jetty, which is why 2025's event has been pushed back a week, as high tides would result in very wet singers. Here, against the backdrop of The Lemonaires, a 10-deep choir of "proud Celtic men" from Falmouth, I catch up with festival founder Tristan Netherton of the Stuns'ls shanty group, named after a stud sail, sailing lingo for sail extensions on a tall ship.

Netherton is a bit of a celebrity around these parts, after featuring in the first BBC Two series of *Rick Stein's Cornwall*. The Stuns'ls have played to King Charles (then Prince of Wales) and the attendees of the 2021 G7 summit, plus they've recorded for Warner Brothers. Netherton is from nearby Sticker and is a man whose Cornish family history reaches back several generations.

"I launched the festival to showcase the tradition of sea-shanty singing," he says. "Yet a big driver was to increase trade and commerce in the local area. Mevagissey in October is quiet, as the main tourist season is over. But businesses must still pay their staff.

"The first year [2019] we welcomed 26 groups," Netherton explains. "That's great for the village as, just from singers, you're starting to fill up accommodation. A pub landlady asked me how much it would cost to feature the groups. I said you don't have to pay them, just give them a beer. Well, with the free beer she gave away plus that drunk by the visitors, she went through 13 barrels on the Friday night alone. She spent the Saturday morning running around trying to find extra beer from other pubs. But it's great, as pubs have a hard time generally and this really brings the visitors in."

> ***"Shanties let us connect with the sailors of old"***

The sun shines on the 2024 festival (waft of Cornish pasties not pictured)

Around 10,000 people will be lifted by the shanty harmonies over the three festival days – the biggest yet. The 2024 edition of the nearby Falmouth Festival also broke records, with around 100,000 people in attendance. "Ours is slightly different in that while we're predominantly shanty, there are other genres, too, just in case you've had enough of [the shanty] 'John Kanaka'," says Netherton. "You might want to listen to folk or a ukelele group. In fact, I've twisted my other half's arm to play this weekend. She's part of a barbershop quartet called Fortuity. They're ranked 10th in the world and are off to sing in America next week."

SEAFARERS' SONGS

Arguably, the transatlantic route is where shanties took off. Though historians have traced examples of what might be called sea shanties back to at least the 16th century, shanties as we know them really set sail during the 19th century. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, new trade routes opened up, especially from Britain to America's eastern seaboard.

Vessels such as Cutty Sark needed groups of men to co-ordinate during routine tasks, including setting the sails and raising anchors. Singing not only alleviated boredom, it galvanised the workforce too. As time rolled by, the function of the songs evolved, the rhythm of the songs mimicking specific on-board actions.

"You have different types of shanty songs," explains Netherton. "There's 'capstan', which is going round in a circle, like you would when heaving an anchor. 'Drunken Sailor' is one example. You've then got 'pump' shanties, like 'Rolling Down' to 'Old Maui'. These were designed for the rhythm of pumping water out of ships, which were rather leaky back then. And you have a 'hauling' shanty [or halyard] like 'Hauling Away Joe' for jobs like hoisting sails. Each of those styles had different rhythms and speeds, albeit they weren't sung at the pace they are now. You'd kill the crew!"

Shanties follow a call-and-response structure that has its roots in Africa. One person sings a line of a song, which is then repeated by the rest of the group. "The owners of the merchant ships quickly realised that if you had a good shantyman it made the crew work more productively. That's why a good shantyman was one of the highest paid people on the ship.

"It's also why shanties were arguably one of the first music forms to spread around the globe and why shanties are influenced by the globe," Netherton adds. "Think about the British Empire. They would have been in America with

The cutlass-wielding
Pirates of St Piran

The Mevagissey Male Voice
Choir keeping it local

slaves loading cotton on to ships. A shantyman would have heard slaves singing between themselves and thought, 'I like the tune of that'. They'd then adapt and reuse it."

Shanties are a hearty mix of linguistic and musical influences, from hymns to folk music. They were performed by multicultural crews whose only shared language was song. They were also a living, breathing piece of history for sailors, who could neither read nor write, let alone chronicle their existence in diaries. Shanties let us connect with the lives and loves of the crews of old and the worlds they inhabited. Their tough lives are captured by songs that are sometimes tragic, often humorous and inevitably bawdy, against a tune and chorus that are easily learnt.

That's all encapsulated by 'A Drop of Nelson's Blood', adds Netherton. "That song always makes me smile," he says. "After smashing through the French and Spanish fleets in Trafalgar, Nelson was fatally shot onboard HMS Victory. To preserve his body on the voyage back to Britain, the crew put him in a barrel full of rum. Essentially, they pickled him. The crew, however, thirsty for a drop of alcohol, tapped the barrel and started drinking the contents. Hence, the name of the song."

DEMOCRATIC APPEAL

It's fair to say 'A Drop of Nelson's Blood' plays out in Mevagissey many times over this memorable weekend. But each rendition sounds fresh and vibrant due to the democratic love of shanty. "I really like the age range across the groups," says Somerset-based Ben Palmer, who is in Cornwall specifically for the festival. "We've seen men and women in their 80s

Three of the hearty best

Delving into the lyrics and history of a shanty triumvirate...

'Cousin Jack'

"Where there's a mine or
a hole in the ground
That's what I'm heading for,
that's where I'm bound"

'Cousin Jack' tells the story of men and their families having to leave their villages in Cornwall to emigrate in search of work. Over each decade from 1861 to 1901, Cornwall lost 20% of its male population, the majority of them from the mining community. There are many theories about the song's title; Cornish emigrants would often call their countrymen 'cousin', while Jack was a popular name in the county.

'Drunken Sailor'

"What shall we do with
the drunken sailor..."

The lyrics date from at least 1855. On long sea journeys, alcohol was safer to store and drink than water so it had long been part of maritime culture. This ditty offers several remedies for sailors who overdid it. Examples include: "Put him in a longboat till he's sober"; "Shave his belly with a rusty razor"; and, rather naughtily, "Put him in the bed with the captain's daughter". This was one of the shanties that the British Royal Navy were permitted to sing. The lyrics for most were deemed too parochial!

'Leave Her Johnny Leave Her'

"I thought I heard
the Old Man say,
'Leave her Johnny, leave her
Tomorrow you will get your pay
And it's time for us to leave her."

This popular shanty was usually reserved for the last day of a voyage as a way of ridding yourself of any grievances. Although the first written record of 'Leave Her, Johnny Leave Her' dates to around 1917, its origins are unknown; that said, it shares the same melody as the shanty 'Across the Western Ocean', which was inspired by penniless Irish trying to flee the potato famine between 1846 and 1852.

Mevagissey's harbour is still home to fishing boats

The blue coats of St Neot's Loveny Male Voice Choir

Nonse explatectem.
milibus amus end
Sed ma

Mr Smiley meets Mr Happy on Mevagissey quayside

harmonising with 20-year-olds. It shows how shanties are for everyone."

"There's also a clear sense of community," Palmer adds. "On the first night, we ended up in the backroom of the Fountain Inn. We'd seen two groups [the all-female ACapella Moonshine and the all-male Mevagissey Quay Notes], who were brilliant. We thought that was the end but then one person sat down and broke out into shanty. Another person then picked up the shanty baton and started singing, before a chap who looked like a hardened builder sang like a dream. It was beautiful."

This strong sense of togetherness pervaded Mevagissey and is symptomatic of the maritime spirit, says Netherton. "We don't charge for a festival like this, but we obviously have costs like erecting stages and the marquee, so to raise funds we'll have events like shanty nights in the build-up. If I get on the phone to another group and they're available, they'll happily play for a ticketed event for free. Well, maybe for a pint." No-one epitomises this sense of community more than Netherton himself. One of the aims of the festival is to raise funds for local groups, with over £10,000 raised so far. His dream is to give out interest-free loans for those in the area, but there's one clear proviso: it must benefit the community.

> **"The better the economy, the better life is for everybody here"**

"If Mevagissey rowing club came to us, for example, and asked for a loan for a new boat, immediately we'd ask how would it benefit the village? That then gets them thinking that they'd organise a gig-rowing regatta, bringing 20 crews from Cornwall and beyond. They'd advertise it, so it'd pull in holidaymakers. The better you can make the business economy, the better you make life for everybody here."

Netherton and the festival certainly brought together visitors, locals and singers with not one single utterance of 'emmet' (a derogatory Cornish term for tourists). It also attracted groups from mainland Europe, for shanty isn't a solely British love affair.

French and Breton sailors have their own shanty traditions, including songs such as 'Le Capitaine de San Malo'. Popular festivals take place in Brest and Paimpol, while one of the biggest is held in Germany – over 100,000 visitors attend the International Festival Maritime Bremen each year.

"There are also shanty festivals in the Netherlands, including one we organise in our home town of Appingedam," says Janneke Woldhuis of the group Armstrong's Patent, who sang six times over the Mevagissey weekend. "We've been singing for almost 33 years." Woldhuis says shanties are growing in popularity in the Netherlands, but they love singing in England because it's the mother tongue of shanties. "The audience know most of the songs, so they join in with the choruses," he says. "Mevagissey is special. It's not only beautiful but the venues are all quite close together. There are some nice pubs, too."

North America and Canada also host sea shanty festivals, including the Fundy Sea Shanty Festival in New Brunswick, Canada, which is growing, says the festival's artistic director Gary Caines. "We have around 11 main-stage acts plus another five or six performing at small venues. One half focuses on traditional shanties, while the other is more Celtic music." Caines says shanties are part of the seafaring roots of the coastal town Fundy-St.Martins.

The Canadians are riding the wave of another shanty renaissance. During Covid lockdown, Scottish post worker Nathan Evans posted a video of himself on TikTok, singing the 19th-century whaling song 'Wellerman'. A stream of views swirled into a storm. Millions of hits elevated him to star status and hauled sea shanties to a global audience. Soon after, Evans went to number one in the UK charts, while Bristol-based shanty group The Longest Johns signed a deal with Decca Records. This shanty second-wind followed the success of Port Isaac's Fisherman Friends, who signed a million-pound recording deal with Universal Records in 2010, before a two-film series charted their success.

When steam ships began to replace sailing ships in the latter half of the 19th century, the type of work changed and so did the musical accompaniment. But like the soul-stirring shanties drifting across Mevagissey, their appeal will remain eternal.

BBC iPLAYER

Learn more about Mevagissey and Cornish culture in BBC Two's *Rick Stein's Cornwall* series.

James Witts is a Somerset-based journalist who has written for *Men's Health, The Observer* and *GQ*. His published books include *Riding with the Rocketmen* (Bloomsbury).

A SHIPMENT OF SHANTIES

Raise your spirits in 2025 with these maritime festivals

Oktoberfest
The Shanglers

BARRY ISLAND SEA SHANTY FESTIVAL

31 May – 1 June 2025

2024 saw the first-ever sea shanty festival take place in *Gavin & Stacey* country. This year, across six venues, more than 40 singers and groups celebrated 200 years of the RNLI's life-saving work. It's going ahead in 2025 – expect bigger.

MORECAMBE MARITIME FESTIVAL

16 August 2025

Enjoy buccaneering melodies in this Lancashire seaside town. The festival celebrates Morecambe's proud maritime culture with captivating performances and a variety of outdoor activities on the town's Promenade. **morecambemaritimefestival.uk**

THE MOTLEY CREW
BRIGH

HARWICH INTERNATIONAL SHANTY FESTIVAL

10–12 October 2025

One of the UK's most popular shanty festivals, 2025 will be its 20th edition. Expect lusty shanties, street theatre, maritime crafts, pirates and historical re-enactment, barge trips, walks, talks and workshops. **harwichshantyfestival.co.uk**

MEVAGISSEY SHANTY FESTIVAL

17–19 October 2025

Interviewee Ben Palmer said the 2024 event was one of the best weekends of his life. We'd have to agree. **mevashantyfest.co.uk** Also look out for the Falmouth International Sea Shanty Festival, 13–15 June 2025. **falmouthseashanty.co.uk**

Photos: Remy Whiting

January

Q&A The big questions answered

Need an answer?
Send your questions to
editor@countryfile.com

Many marine biologists work on projects to protect our precious coastal habitats

1

How do I become a marine biologist?

The first study of marine biology is often credited to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who reportedly made observations on sea life. Famous marine biologists include Charles Darwin and Rachel Carson, author of *The Sea Around Us*, while John Steinbeck detailed the profession in a number of his books, chiefly *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.

Working as a marine biologist is a richly varied and rewarding job that involves studying the sea and its ecosystems. There are so many different areas within this discipline, but all require strong research and scientific skills. You could be focusing on individual species out in the ocean, from blue whales to phytoplankton, or monitoring the effects of pollution or climate change on habitats such as coral reefs.

Other roles are based almost entirely in laboratories, or in academic research or education, with visits to communities and schools being a core element. Some marine biologists work as fishery data managers, conserving stocks and helping fishing companies ensure their catches fall within legal limits. Then there are consultants working with gas and oil companies or windfarm constructors to find ways to limit the impact of their work on the oceanic environment.

> **“You could be focusing on individual species out in the ocean or monitoring the effects of climate change”**

In the UK, marine biologists have been involved in many rewilding projects (called ‘seawilding’ by some), such as creating the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) to protect the local marine habitats off the west coast of Scotland and reverse the decline of fish stocks caused by overfishing. Then there is the Sussex Kelp Recovery Project, which works to protect and enhance internationally important kelp forests in the Channel that have been decimated by trawler fishing.

You can find out more about the whole range of marine science research projects around the UK from the Marine Biological Association (**mba.ac.uk**).

CLEAR PATHWAY

So there are a host of employment opportunities within marine biology. Better still, the path to get there is more straightforward than many other careers. The journey starts at

Field work can include wildlife surveys – here a marine biologist counts seals for the Zoological Society London (ZSL)'s Thames marine mammal survey

GCSE level, though it is possible to catch up later with top-up qualifications. The core subjects to study include the three sciences plus maths and English. It's helpful to have information and communication technology (ICT), geography and a foreign language, too.

At A-Level, you will naturally need biology. Chemistry is also important and one or more of physics, maths, geography and computing – though it's important to check the requirements of the degree course you plan to follow before committing to your choices.

In the UK, 22 universities offer 73 courses in marine biology, though if you're unsure, you may want to consider a broader science-based course, such as biological sciences, environmental sciences or ecology before committing to marine biology later. Further down the line, you might want to do a masters and then a PhD to specialise further and enhance your career prospects.

CV BOOSTERS

As for getting a job, the advice is the same as for almost any career. Volunteer, gain experience and build knowledge alongside your studies. It could even be as simple as getting involved in beach cleans or rock-pooling sessions with a local Wildlife Trust. Helping out somewhere that specialises in marine biology, such as a zoo or aquarium, can give your CV a huge boost, as can attending specialist conferences where you can meet fellow marine biologists at all levels and perhaps discover what niche you might enjoy most.

It's worth joining a scuba or underwater diving club at university to gain diving qualifications – especially as these are likely to be subsidised. It could make all the difference when applying for a job.

Few people go into marine biology to become rich in financial terms – the rewards are elsewhere. According to the careers advice website prospects.ac.uk, starting salaries for a junior research assistant or lab assistant can be as low as £12,000. A marine biologist with a PhD might earn somewhere between £26,000 and £45,000. A consultant marine biologist could earn much more, depending on the area they are working in.

The hours can be long however, especially working out in the 'field'. But considering the vast majority of people spend their working lives at a desk, being immersed in nature and helping build our understanding of the world's precious marine habitats could well be said to be beyond monetary value. **Fergus Collins**

What's in a name?

A marine scientist researches the geography, physics and chemistry of the world's oceans, while marine biologists analyse the flora and fauna that live within the seas.

Photos Alamy

Even when wearing a hat and sunscreen, summer sun exposure is generally enough to produce sufficient vitamin D

2

Why is vitamin D so important?

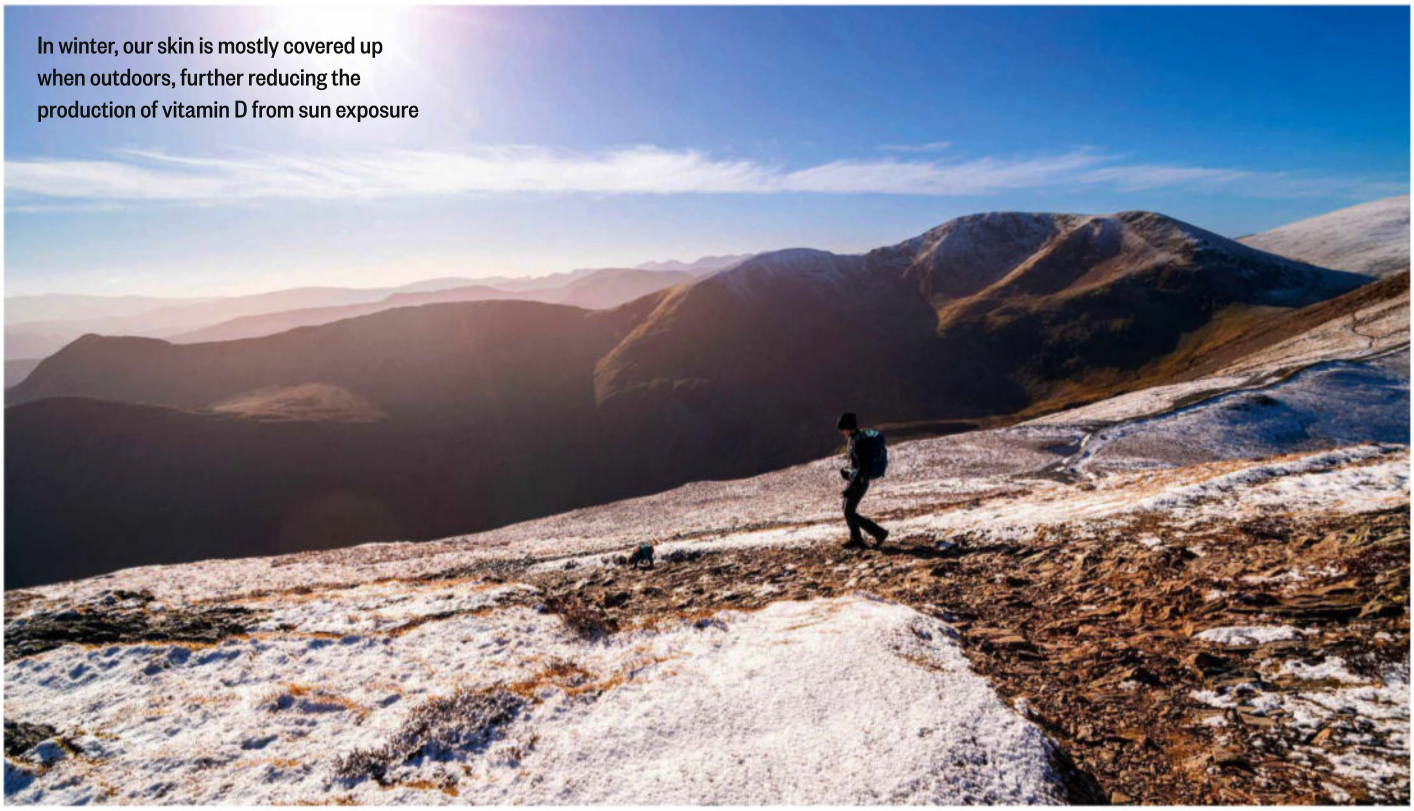
It's wintertime and that means cosy fires, country pubs and a lack of vitamin D, aka the 'sunshine vitamin'. It's handed this bright and beautiful moniker because it's the sole vitamin that's produced when skin is directly exposed to sunlight or, more specifically, UVB (ultraviolet B) rays. In the summer, there should be sufficient hours of sunshine to stimulate your recommended daily amount. The same can't be said for winter with shortened days and cloudier skies. Which is a problem.

"The more we learn about vitamin D, the more we realise how important it is," says Dr Claire Pettitt, an expert dietitian and nutritionist. "It's more classically known for its part in bone health, but it also plays a key role in immunity – it helps our bodies fight infections – and mood regulation, as low levels are linked to depression."

As well as sunshine stimulation, you can source vitamin D from foods, including oily fish, eggs, liver, sun-exposed mushrooms and fortified options, such as some fat spreads and breakfast cereals. The problem is it features in a small number of foods and in very small quantities, and is insufficient to deliver the NHS recommendation of 10 microgrammes (mcg) per day.

That's why the NHS advises taking a vitamin D supplement from October to March. Pettitt agrees and directs you to vitamin D3, also known as cholecalciferol. "It's the most effective form to increase your vitamin D levels because it's the same form that we produce in our skin through sun exposure. That's important, as many supplements are actually in the D2 form, which is less potent."

This 10mcg figure is set in stone and doesn't change as you age, though there is evidence that a vitamin D deficiency ages you. Research in the *Journals of Gerontology* in 2020 studied epigenetic patterns in 1,600 subjects and discovered that those with low



In winter, our skin is mostly covered up when outdoors, further reducing the production of vitamin D from sun exposure

Whenever the sun shines in winter, get outside to benefit from its mood-boosting effect

> **“Vitamin D plays a key role in immunity and mood regulation – low levels are linked to depression”**

vitamin D levels in their blood were biologically older than those who had adequate levels – also known as ‘age acceleration’.

So, the elixir of life is in vitamin D form, which you should enjoy with foods that contain fat as it’s a fat-soluble vitamin. But before you reach for the fun-sized packet of crisps, we’re talking the healthy fats found in avocados, nuts, seeds, eggs, salmon and mackerel.

These supplements are affordable so, in theory, you’d think vitamin D deficiency was relatively rare. That’s not the experience of Pettitt. “Vitamin D deficiency is actually quite common (between 25 and 58% of the UK population depending on which definition you use), even in the summer and, for some, even with a supplement. This is especially true if you’re someone who doesn’t spend a lot of time outdoors, like the elderly or those working long hours at a desk.

“Specific sectors of the population suffer from vitamin D deficiency, too. In the area of women’s health, those with polycystic ovary syndrome and infertility often record low levels. Individuals with gut disorders – e.g. those with coeliac disease or irritable bowel syndrome – might not absorb sufficient levels, either.”

Skin colour impacts the situation, too. According to a 2021 study in the journal *Nutrients*, African Americans have a 15–20-fold higher prevalence of severe vitamin-D deficiency due to melanin in the skin blocking the UVB solar radiation necessary for its synthesis.

Vitamin D deficiency has also been linked to fatigue and tiredness, muscle weakness and falls in the elderly, and bone-health issues, such as osteoporosis and osteomalacia. “It’s even been linked to an increased risk of chronic health issues like heart disease, diabetes and cancer,” Pettitt adds. “Ultimately, whatever population you sit in, you should have your levels checked regularly and supplement accordingly.”

Test it

You can have your blood tested for vitamin D levels from £20. Pharmacies also sell finger-prick test kits for around £8.

And that’s not solely in search of a deficit. “The upper limit for vitamin D intake is 100mcg for adults, which means taking more than that may be harmful,” says Pettitt. “If you take too much vitamin D, so that it increases the amount in your blood to pretty high levels, you may experience nausea, vomiting, confusion, pain, loss of appetite or excessive thirst or urination, even kidney stones and kidney failure. To reiterate, have your blood tested and then, ideally, discuss what dose of vitamin D supplementation you should be taking with a healthcare practitioner.”

Colds and flu affect around 15 million people in the UK each year and are much more common in the winter. Supplementing with vitamin D might not be a bulletproof option to prevent illness but there’s clear evidence it bolsters your immune system. Either that or head to sunnier climes. Now there’s a thought…

James Witts

Photos Alamy

Grass is cut for silage from late April to mid-May and baled on the same day

3

What are silage and slurry, and are they smelly?

Silage and slurry are quite different from each other but both are smelly. In essence, silage goes in one end of the cow and slurry comes out of the other.

Silage is fermented grass used as animal feed. As grass grows vigorously in spring, it is cut in May (and again in June or July in a good year) then stored in anaerobic conditions where no oxygen or water can penetrate. Here it ferments – the sugars in the grass turn to acids – and the nutrition in the grass is preserved, to be fed to the herd when needed, in autumn and winter when grass has stopped growing.

During the fermenting process, the silage gives off a far-reaching, sweet-sour odour that divides opinion as strongly as it smells.

The latter half of the 20th century saw silage replace traditional hay for animal feed. Hay-making requires the grass to be left to grow longer, before it is cut and dried outside in the summer sun. Hopefully. Success is heavily dependent on good weather. Plus hay requires a great deal of dry storage to keep it fresh. Hence the move to quicker, more dependable silage making, where the end result is usually left out in the field covered in watertight plastic. While the move to silage has been beneficial for farmers, wildlife has lost out. Hay meadows usually contain a variety of grasses, legumes and flowers that support a host of wildlife. Silage is usually made from a single species of rye grass. And the earlier cutting times prevent ground-nesting species such as curlews and lapwings from rearing young before the mowers arrive.

Farm slurry is the name given to fertiliser made from cow dung mixed with water that is then spread on the fields to encourage crops to grow. The dung is collected from cow sheds and stored in slurry pits or lagoons. DEFRA advises farmers that the best time to spread slurry is spring and summer when crops need it most; there are regulations that are supposed to prevent spreading at the wrong time of year. There is almost universal agreement that slurry does not smell good, though a heavy pong will encourage some folk to take a deep breath and laud “the healthy smell of the countryside”.

Farm slurry is rich in nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium and while these help plants grow, they cause problems elsewhere. Slurry, being liquid, is easily washed away into rivers by rain. Once there, the fertilisers promote algal blooms that choke aquatic ecosystems. Badly managed slurry is a major source of water pollution in Britain today.

Fergus Collins

Slurry risk

Working with slurry can be dangerous; it’s easy to become overcome by the gas fumes released during the slurry mixing process.

> **“While the move from hay to silage has been beneficial for farmers, wildlife has lost out”**

4 What's the difference between a frog and a toad?

In Britain, we have two native toad species and two frog species – the common frog, pool frog, common toad and natterjack toad. All are amphibians and all, superficially at least, have a very similar shape, breed in water and make a variety of chirping and purring noises. But look more closely and the differences become very apparent.

The common frog and the common toad are, as their names suggest, the most frequently encountered and are easy to compare and contrast. Skin is the first big difference. The frog's skin is smooth, while the toad's is rough or warty. The toad tends to be a more uniform beige or brown while the frog is more dapper and varied in its green, brown, even yellow attire.

They get around differently, too. The frog has long, spring-like back legs for sudden leaps. The toad, while having longer back legs than front, is a crawler. Instead of leaping from danger, it relies on bufotoxin, a foul-tasting substance secreted from its skin, particularly from the parotoid glands behind its head, which can repel would-be predators.

Both frog and toad need ponds or slow-moving rivers in which to breed. Frogs tend to breed earlier in the year, from January in the far south-west of England. Toads can still be found breeding in April or May.

While frogs lay great clouds of spawn – masses of jelly-like eggs all balled together – toads lay their eggs in long, thin strings wrapped around water plants. After they hatch, toad tadpoles often shoal together for protection, though they also contain distasteful bufotoxin so fish tend to avoid them.

Frog tadpoles are more solitary and are very vulnerable to fish, newts, dragonfly larvae and many other predators. With both species, only a tiny fraction of tadpoles survive to transform into a froglet or toadlet, and fewer still make it to adulthood.

Fergus Collins

Common toads make mass migrations back to their breeding ponds on damp evenings in spring

In winter, common frogs hibernate in pond mud or under log piles

Photos Alamy

5

Where are Britain's snowiest areas?

Nothing transforms our landscapes – and our lives – more quickly and completely than heavy snowfall. Roads are blocked, trains are halted and planes grounded. The countryside is draped in a white, almost lifeless blanket and sound is eerily muffled.

Snow is formed when temperatures fall below 2°C and moisture in the air turns into clouds of tiny ice crystals. The ice crystals gradually bond with each other, growing large and heavy enough to fall as snowflakes. If the temperature is well below zero, they fall as small powdery flakes that settle and are easily blown by wind into deep drifts. But if the snowflakes fall through slightly warmer air (0–2°C) they partially melt and stick together to form larger flakes. If the temperature is just above 2°, the snow falls as sleet – partially melted snowflakes that can appear more like pellets of snow. Any warmer and the snow turns into rain.

The winters of 1946/47 and 1962/63 have assumed legendary status in Britain's weather-obsessed culture. In 1947, the Thames froze for the first time in 200 years and in some areas the snow drifted 7m deep. The season in 1963 was even colder with snow falling across the country around Christmas and remaining well into March.

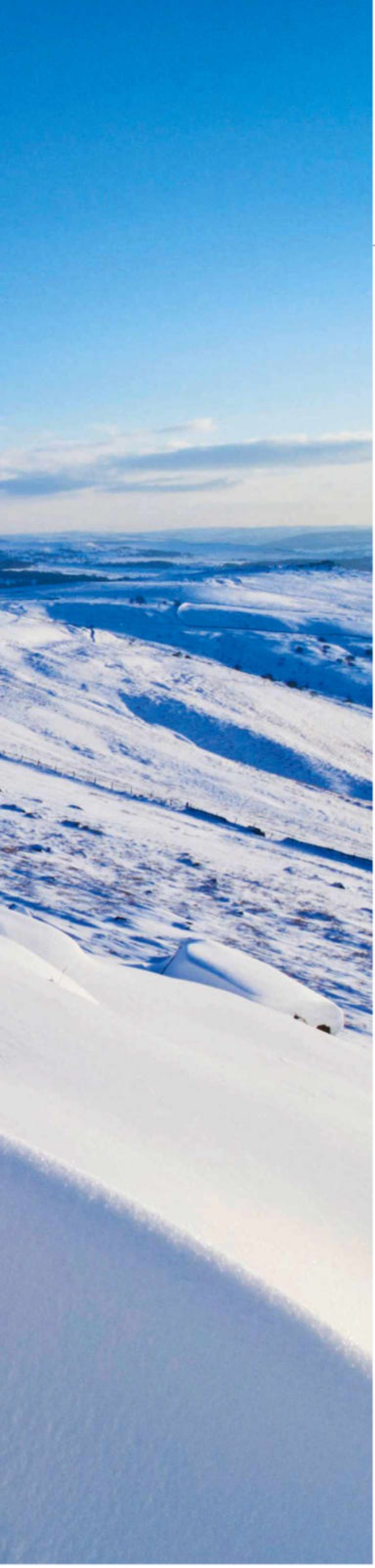
However, such extreme cold events are becoming rarer with climate change. The Met Office reports that our winters have become 1.7°C milder since the 1960s. Its data also shows there have been on average five fewer snow days per year in Britain per decade since 1979.

As for the UK's snowiest places, the Cairngorms in Scotland leads the way with 76.2 days of snow a year. One area of snowfall on the remote peak of Brierach (1,295m), named The Sphinx, is historically the longest-lasting patch of snow in Britain, enduring all year round. However, in another worrying sign of climate change, it has disappeared completely five times since 2017, having only melted nine times in the previous 300 years.

Copley in County Durham's North Pennines is England's snowiest location with 53 days a year, while parts of Eryri and the Berwyn Mountains further east are Wales' snowiest spots with 10–30 days of snow a year. In Northern Ireland, the mountains of Sperrin, Antrim and Mourne receive up to 30 days of snow a year. **Fergus Collins**

> "The Cairngorms is the UK's snowiest place with 76.2 days of snow a year"

Pillowy drifts cover the gritstone escarpment of Stanage Edge in the Peak District National Park



6 What is the UK's most dangerous road?

Local services
Distillery
Visitor Centre

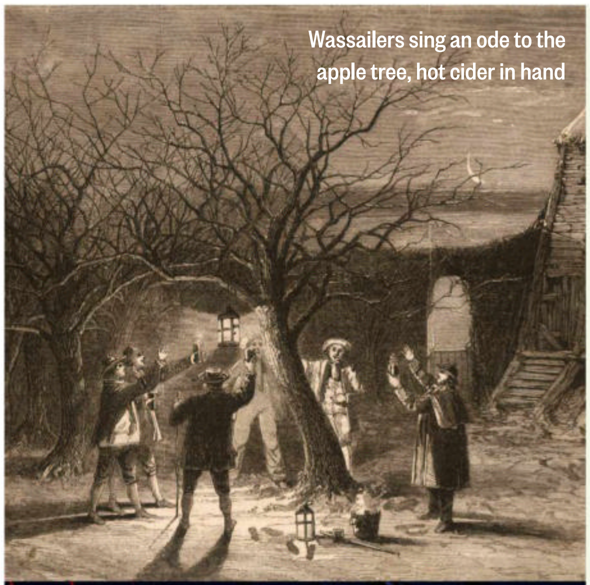
Take extra care when turning on to the A889 to Dalwhinnie

Britain's roads are perilous. The most recent Government statistics from 2023 reveal that 28,967 people were seriously injured on the UK's roads that year, with 1,695 deaths. Using the 10-year average from 2013–2024, five people die and 80 are badly injured every day on our roads. Motorcyclists are the most at risk.

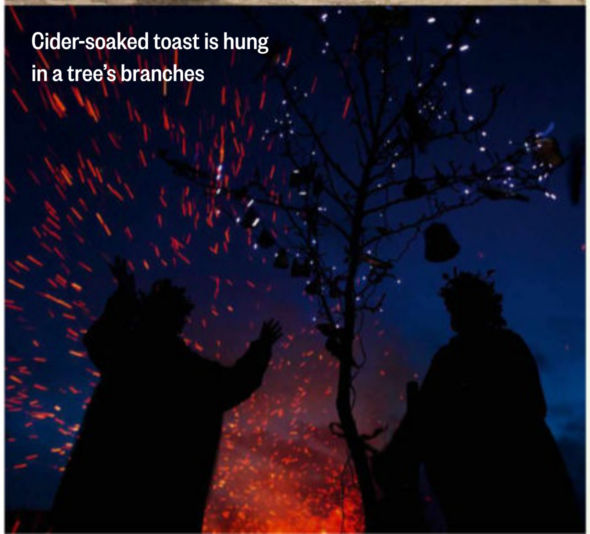
As for Britain's most dangerous 'A' road, in the early 2000s the AA divided the number of accidents by the number of vehicles using a road. It found that the eight-mile stretch of the A889 between the Highland towns of Dalwhinnie and Laggan was twice as dangerous as the second-placed road: the A537 between Macclesfield and Buxton in the Peak District. In 2022, a BBC *Panorama* programme labelled the A82 between Glasgow and Fort William as Britain's most dangerous. **FC**

Speed trap

The A1(M) is the UK's most dangerous motorway, with London's M25 close behind.



Wassailers sing an ode to the apple tree, hot cider in hand



Cider-soaked toast is hung in a tree's branches

7 What is wassailing?

After Christmas, up pops wassailing, nominally on Twelfth Night (5 Jan), to bring welcome light and laughter. In medieval times, wassailing would involve going door-to-door offering drink, song and dancing in exchange for gifts, but this has largely evolved into ceremonies to bless fruit trees: so-called orchard wassails. These are commonly in the cider-making counties of England's west country and comprise music, dancing, mulled cider served in a wooden wassail bowl and appeals to the gods to provide a fruitful harvest.

The origins are murky but the word comes from Old English 'waes hael!' or Norse 'ves heil!' meaning 'be hale!' or 'your health!' and was soon applied to drinking one's health. Today's events, which take place between now and February, also include hanging cider-soaked toast in trees and banging pots to drive away evil spirits. **FC**

Photos Alamy

Masterclass

MORE ONLINE!
For expert kit reviews and exciting outdoor activities across the UK, head to countryfile.com

Create your outdoor gym

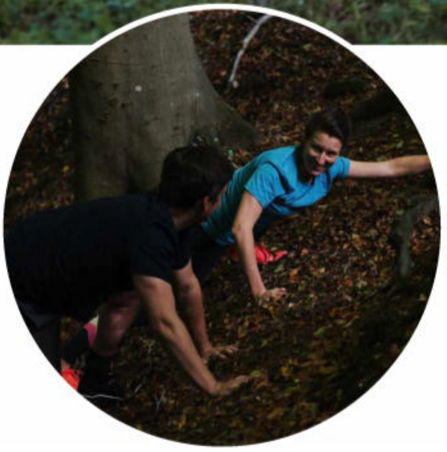
If you struggle to stick to a standard exercise routine or feel intimidated by gyms, you're not alone. Yet there are many ways to build strength outdoors. Here's how...

Gill Erskine is the co-founder of WildStrong which teaches movement skills both online and outdoors around the UK. **wildstrong.co**

Words: **Gill Erskine**
Images: **WildStrong**

1 Start small, start social

Research shows that we're more likely to stick with physical activity when it's enjoyable, social and meaningful. We know that social connections are essential for good mental health, so why not start by finding a friend or a small group to move with? Establish a day or two each week, give your group a fun name – my father-in-law's walking football team is called Arthritico Madrid! – and commit to exploring outdoor movement together. Regular and meaningful social interactions can transform exercise from a chore into a shared experience. Playful movement together, inspired by our environment, can help build strength and confidence for life. And all without machines or structured classes.



2

Find a spot

Spending time outdoors has proven mental health benefits, and there's something magical about revisiting the same space throughout the seasons. So first, look for a green space near you – a park, allotment, garden or field ideally with enough props (trees, logs, stepping stones) for you to balance, climb or swing on. As you and your friend return to your chosen spot, you'll start to feel a sense of belonging and pride in your local environment. Not to mention that tangible practical skill of teaching your body and brain how to move on uneven terrain.

As we age, it becomes vital to keep moving in varied ways to maintain mobility and agility

3

Use it or lose it

Your body is capable of an incredible range of movements – you just need to give yourself permission to try. Think about movements you've started to avoid; common ones include getting up and down from the ground, climbing over objects or jumping. We often stop doing these things due to fear of pain, falling or past injuries. Yet there's almost always a way to regain these movements.

4

Build skills for life

Once you've identified movements to work on, create a list that covers key skills: creative locomotion (crawling; skipping; hopping forwards, backwards and sideways); balancing; lifting and carrying; getting up and down; pushing; pulling; jumping; landing and even falling safely. These movements form a toolkit to keep you moving confidently and practically, no matter what life throws at you.

5

Discover your 'why'

So many of us give up on exercise goals because we can't feel the progress and we lose sight of the reasons we're exercising. Yet creating an awareness of your key skills and movements allows you to discover your 'why'. If you attach your why to real-life skills, such as doing landscaping work in your garden, you'll start to see yourself improving quickly and looking for new movement opportunities everywhere you go outdoors, from parks to woodland paths and hilly trails. Movement literacy is a gift that creates endless possibilities.

6

Think like a child

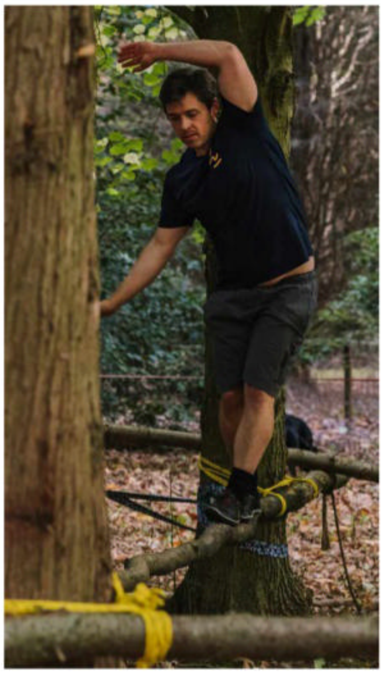
Armed with your list of movements, explore your local area through a playful lens. Children are the experts at this – they'll turn a walk to the post office into an obstacle course, hopping on white lines, balancing on walls and hanging from railings. Think like a child and ask yourself: what can I lift? What can I balance on? What can I jump over or crawl under? Where can I hang or push? Once you start looking, you'll find movement opportunities both outside and around the house.

7

Assess your movements

Assess what you're capable of right now. Work with your friend or group to identify which movements you can perform with ease, and which feel a little wobbly. For those on your wobble list, find ways to break down the movement into smaller steps. Support each other with feedback and try different techniques until you find what works for you.

For movements on your confident list, consider ways to make them more challenging – can you do them slower, faster or add a weight for example?



8

Listen to your body

Little and often is key with your movements and sessions. But remember to always listen to your body for any aches and pains. Experimenting with movements adds a playful element that helps build 'in-between strength' – the little wiggles and adjustments that stabilise us in real-life scenarios. This type of strength isn't often trained on machines in the gym but is essential for everyday strength, such as picking up an awkwardly shaped bag or adjusting your grip while carrying something heavy, like a rock across the garden.

9

Create challenges

Your body is capable of more than you think – every joint and muscle has a wide range of movements. To keep your muscles and joints strong, aim for movement solutions rather than 'correct' exercises. In real life, there's rarely one right way to move, so explore different movement paths that suit your body. Add fun by setting challenges – see how many ways you can get up and down from the ground. You'll discover many variations while building functional strength.

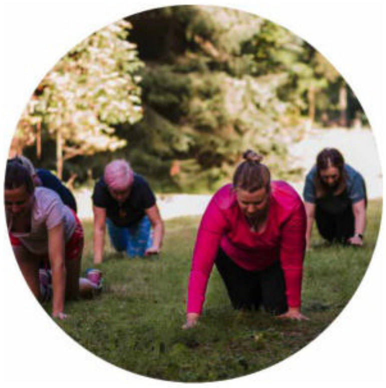
10

Stay safe

Remember, movement doesn't have to be complicated or structured. Do it little and often, and listen to your body as you go. If something doesn't feel right, pull back. Don't take risks, but do push yourself a little. Find a friend, get outside and discover the joy of playful movement together. Explore how your body can adapt and grow, one step, lift or balance at a time. These exercises might look different, but your body has an incredible ability to adapt.
For more movement tips, go to ***wildstrong.co.***

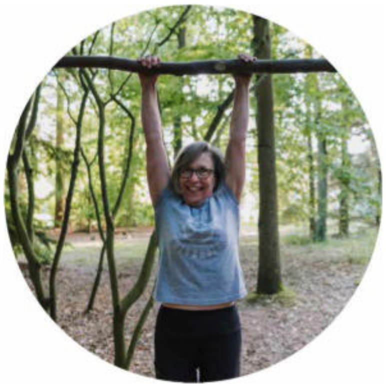
ESSENTIAL MOVES

Three versatile, everyday motions to include in your routine



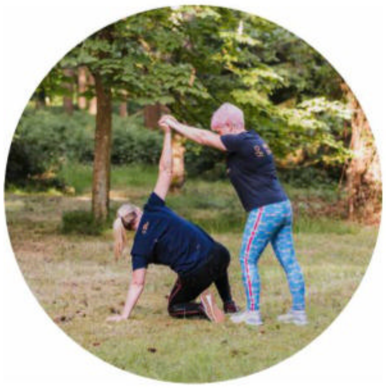
CRAWLING

Try crawling forwards, backwards and sideways. Crawling strengthens your core, improves mobility and reinforces those in-between muscles for stability.



HANGING

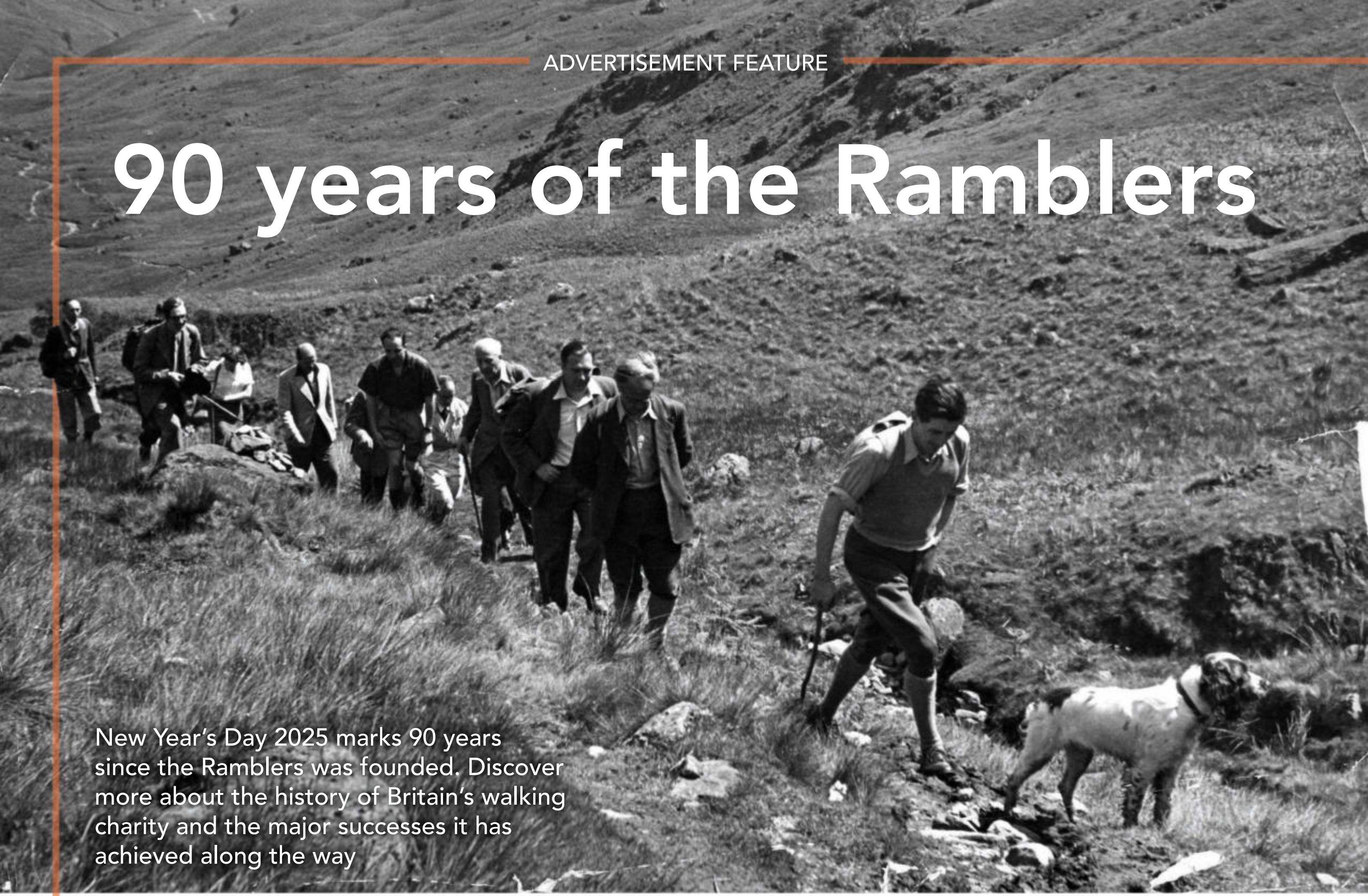
Find a branch or sturdy door frame and hang. Hanging decompresses the spine, strengthens your upper back and improves grip – plus, it feels amazing.



BALANCE GAMES

Balance is essential as we age. Practice standing on one foot or find lines and edges outdoors to balance on, moving forwards, backwards or sideways.

90 years of the Ramblers



New Year's Day 2025 marks 90 years since the Ramblers was founded. Discover more about the history of Britain's walking charity and the major successes it has achieved along the way

Whether it's improving paths or organising group walks, the Ramblers does everything it can to get the nation out walking. Since 1935, the outdoor-loving people at the Ramblers have worked hard to foster Britain's biggest walking community. Not only are they dedicated to removing barriers so everyone can enjoy walking in green spaces, they seek to keep the countryside open to all and fight for the things that matter most to walkers. Let's explore their journey.

NEW BEGINNINGS

The Ramblers' Association was officially created on New Year's Day in 1935 and went on to gain 300 affiliated clubs and 1,200 individual members in its first year. The fledgling organisation immediately began trying to improve countryside access, long-distance paths, national parks and protections for public rights of way. A few years later in 1938, the first Ramblers office opened in Liverpool and the organisation grew in numbers. The 1940s saw the Ramblers continue operations during the Second World War, launch a new commercial arm of the venture – organising walking holidays in Britain and abroad – and help to bring about the 1949 *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act*.

TRAIL TRIUMPH

In the 1950s, the Ramblers successfully campaigned for rights of way to be shown on Ordnance Survey maps, as well as supporting the creation of Britain's first National Trail, the Pennine Way. In 1965, the Pennine Way officially opened and today remains one of the most popular long-distance walks in the UK. Later, the Thames Path National Trail was proposed in 1973 and Ramblers Cymru, the association's Welsh branch, formed the following year. Across the following two decades, the Ramblers continued to play an integral role in protecting green spaces.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

Fast-forward to a new century and we see the passing of the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act* in 2000, allowing roaming access across more than 809,000 hectares of land in England and Wales. The *National Parks (Scotland) Act* was also established in the same year, leading to the creation of Scotland's first national parks: Loch Lomond in 2002 and Cairngorms in 2003. In 2012, the Ramblers took over the Walking for Health programme (previously run by Natural England) offering short gentle walks that are now called Ramblers Wellbeing Walks. They also launched the Mapping Scotland's Paths project in 2019. Within five years, more than 400 volunteers have audited over 13,000 existing paths and added over 2,800 not previously mapped, creating a fantastically useful resource for outdoor enthusiasts in Scotland.

FOR EVERYONE

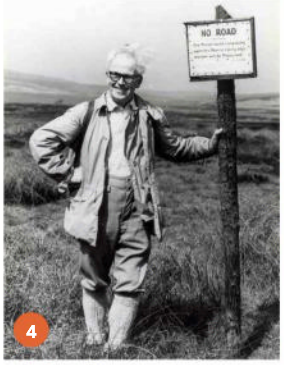
From tirelessly working to improve access to green spaces to launching initiatives that are saving historic footpaths, the Ramblers has spent the last 90 years helping everyone to get out walking. Today, the charity has more than 500 walking groups throughout England, Scotland and Wales, organising about 50,000 group walks a year. Meanwhile, 25,000 amazing Ramblers volunteers give their time and skills to keep Britain walking.

Above: Tom Stephenson, the Ramblers first secretary, leads a group of MPs along his proposed route for the Pennine Way in 1948.

Opposite: 1. Walking in Scotland 2. Early 20th-century walkers 3. The famous Kinder Trespass of 1932 4. Tom Stephenson, the Ramblers' first member of staff 5. Ramblers Scotland formed in 1965 6. The Ramblers outside parliament 7. Young people taking part in the Ramblers Out There Award 8. Amar Latif, the current Ramblers president.

Top right: The King Charles III England Coast Path

BEHOLD YE RAMBLERS
2



Ramblers Association Scotland
5

Rambling TODAY
The Rambl
THE RAMBLER'S HANDBOOK
Come Rambling
THE RAMBLERS' ASSOC
RAMBL NEW

THE RAMBLERS IN DATES

1935 Founded in January

1938 The first Ramblers' Association office opens in Liverpool

1949 *The Ramblers' News* publication is first circulated

2003 The Ramblers magazine, *Walk*, is launched

2009 The Ramblers' Association becomes known as the Ramblers

ramblers
One Coast For All
Campaign for the English Coastal Path
6

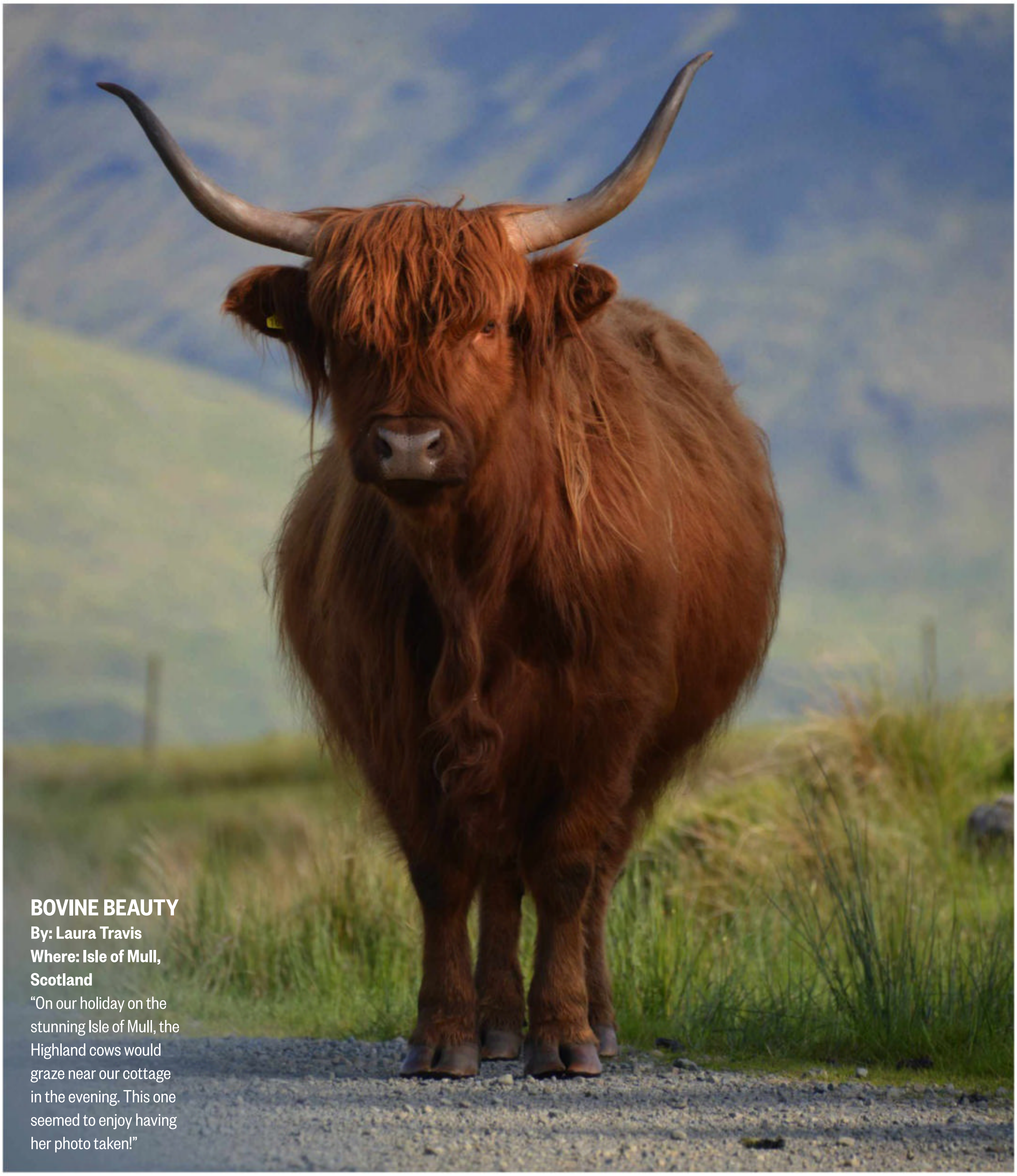
RAMBLERS

Check out *Walk* magazine at **walk.ramblers.org.uk** to read more from the Ramblers

YOUR PHOTOS

Share your best photographs of the British countryside with us and you could see your image published in print or online.

Email your images to **photos@countryfile.com**

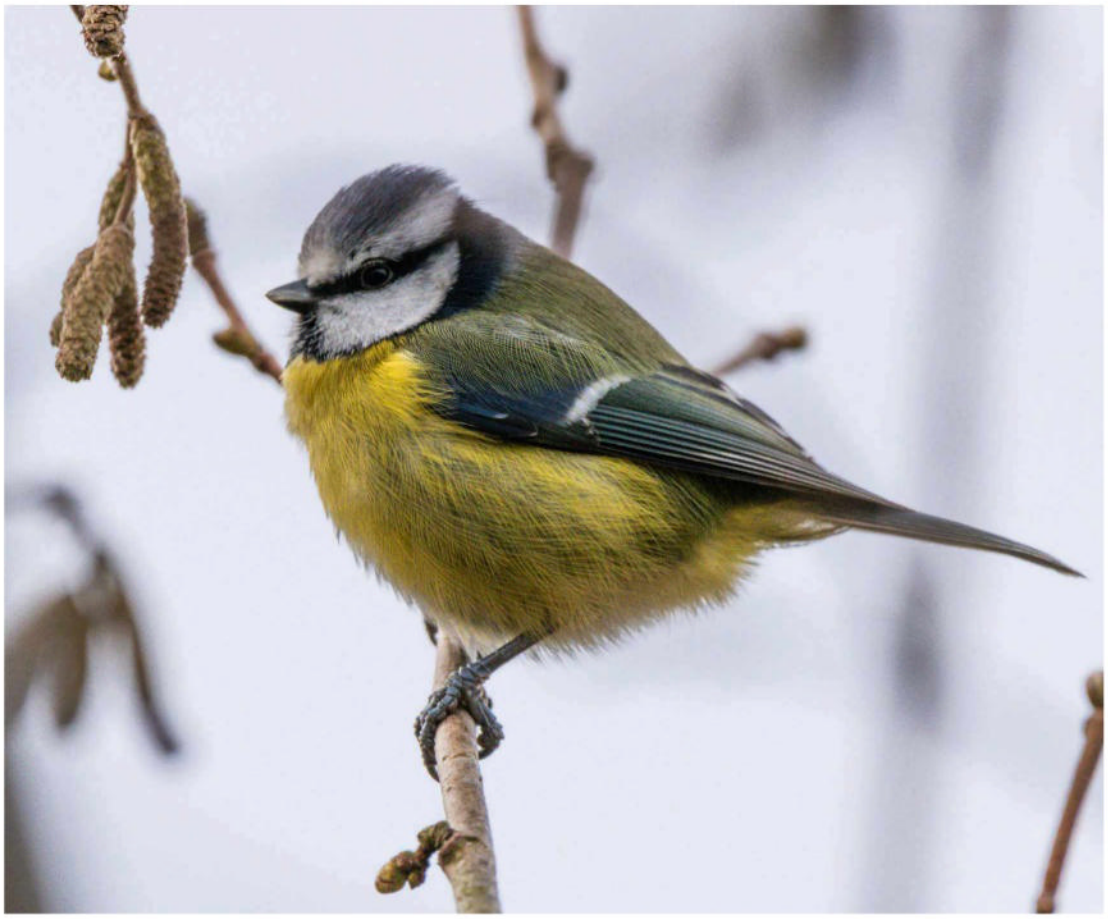


BOVINE BEAUTY

By: Laura Travis

Where: Isle of Mull, Scotland

"On our holiday on the stunning Isle of Mull, the Highland cows would graze near our cottage in the evening. This one seemed to enjoy having her photo taken!"



BRIGHT SPARK

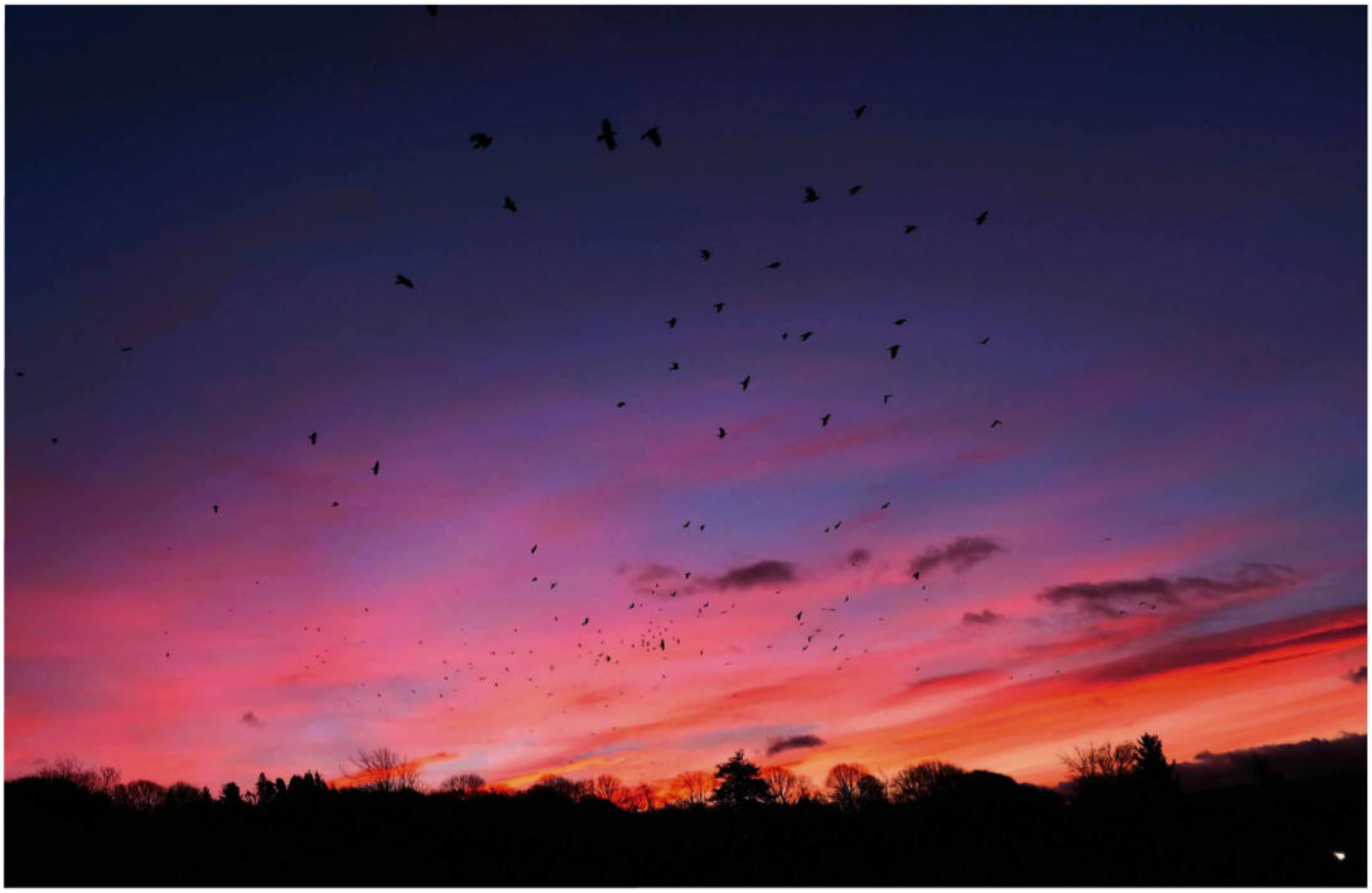
By: Natalie Dunn
Where: Gillingham, Dorset

"I took this on a January walk near our house. Seeing a blue tit in the winter always makes me smile; when the days are mostly cloudy and grey it's lovely to see a spot of colour."

CROW SUNRISE

By: Richard Brown
Where: Battlehill Woods, Huntly, Aberdeenshire

"This photo was taken from the top of our house. In winter, the crows roost in Battlehill Woods then take off together at sunrise. It occurred to me that the trees must benefit from all the bird faeces – free fertiliser from far away."



Country puzzles

COUNTRYSIDE QUIZ

Answers at the bottom of page 96

The UK's largest bird of prey, white-tailed eagles have a wingspan of 200-240cm

1. What is the January King?

☐ a. A winter cabbage
☐ b. A pagan spirit
☐ c. A Dorset folk hero
☐ d. A medieval dance

2. How many hunting dogs are featured on the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish stone?

☐ a. 7
☐ b. 5
☐ c. 4
☐ d. 3

3. Where was the first reintroduction of white-tailed eagles in the UK?

☐ a. Isle of Wight
☐ b. Rum, Scotland
☐ c. South Wales
☐ d. Wild Ken Hill, Norfolk

4. Many Twelfth Night customs have their origins in which Roman festival?

☐ a. Volturnalia
☐ b. Ambarvalia
☐ c. Saturnalia
☐ d. Parentalia

5. Who was crowned monarch of England on 15 January 1559?

☐ a. Elizabeth I
☐ b. Henry VIII
☐ c. Edward VI
☐ d. Mary I

6. What is the Black Shuck?

☐ a. An oyster festival
☐ b. A sea shanty
☐ c. A woodworking tool
☐ d. A phantom dog of legend

7. The 'Selkirk Grace' is often recited on 25 January; who wrote it?

☐ a. William Dunbar
☐ b. Robert Burns
☐ c. Robert Louis Stevenson
☐ d. Walter Scott

8. Which day in January is traditionally said to be the coldest day of the year?

☐ a. 2
☐ b. 7
☐ c. 13
☐ d. 28

9. On the first Monday after Twelfth night, which Cambridgeshire village parades a man dressed as a straw bear through the streets?

☐ a. Whittlesey
☐ b. Great Wilbraham
☐ c. Ickleton
☐ d. Histon

10. On 28 January, where can you see the Viking fire festival Up Helly Aa?

☐ a. Crail, Fife
☐ b. Stromness, Orkney
☐ c. Barra, Outer Hebrides
☐ d. Lerwick, Shetland

11. 'Capstan', 'halyard' and 'pump' are all types of what?

☐ a. Life-saving equipment
☐ b. Ship's rope
☐ c. Sea shanty
☐ d. Shrimp

12. Which church did Sir John Betjeman describe as "the least spoilt church in Cornwall"?

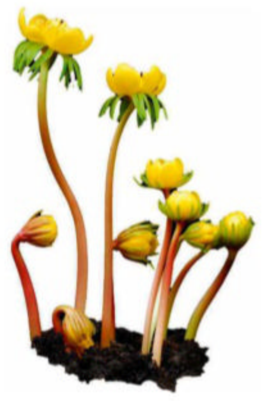
☐ a. St Swithin's, Launcells
☐ b. St Winwalloe, Gunwalloe
☐ c. St Nonna, Altarnon
☐ d. St Breaca, Breage

13. The fungi King Alfred's cakes were traditionally used as what?

☐ a. Headache medicine
☐ b. Ink
☐ c. Fire lighters
☐ d. Doorstops

14. Which January flowering wild plant is pictured below?

☐ a. Green hellebore
☐ b. Lesser celandine
☐ c. Winter aconite
☐ d. Winter heliotrope



Photos: Alamy

George Barclay

ENGLAND

George Barclay
ENGLAND

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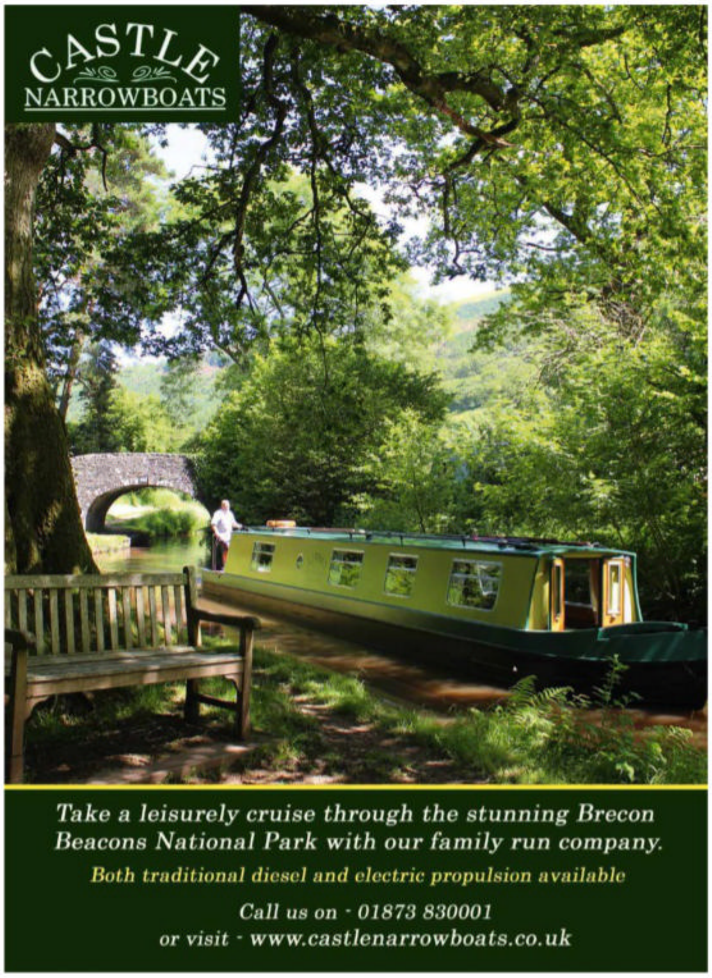
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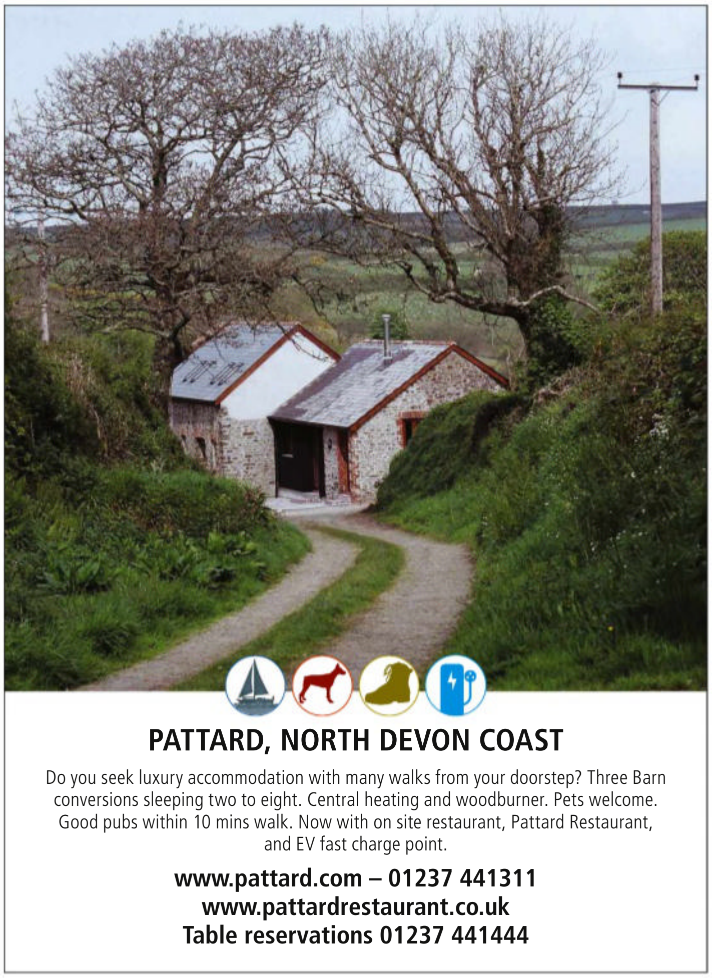
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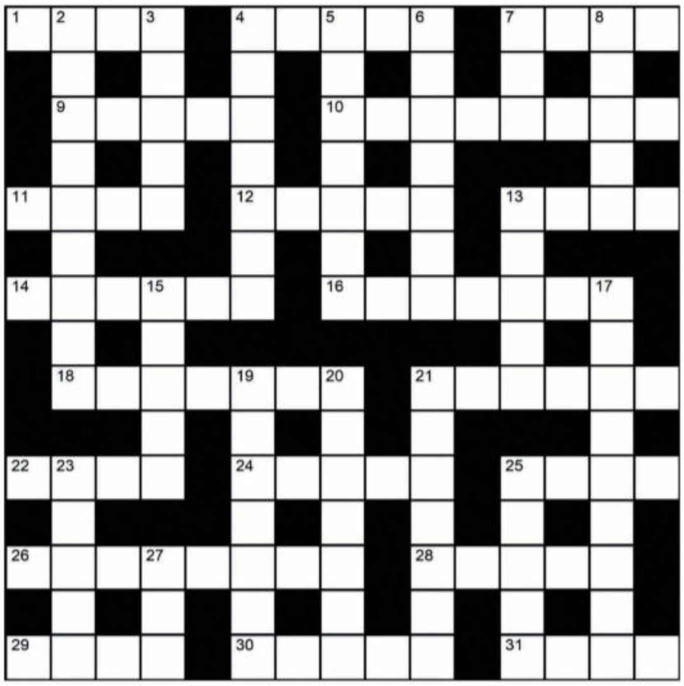
COUNTRYSIDE CROSSWORD

by Eddie James



ACROSS

1/21 across Corny artwork in a field! (4, 6)

4 Term for a group of female pheasants – partly share male (5)

7 Makes fun of… a leaf's main veins (4)

9 Mouse-like insectivore with long snout (5)

10 Describes a wall built without mortar (8)

11 A fallen one might take the spring out of your step! (4)

12 Farm machine that compresses and bundles cut hay (5)

13 Type of kiln for drying hops (4)

14 County location of Cerne Abbas Giant (6)

16 Sessile and English are ___ of oak (7)

18 A source of crows in the farmyard? (7)

21 See **1 across**

22 Fungal disease of plants – must change (4)

24 Highland resort on Moray Firth – in open air, naturally (5)

25 Uses weeding tool – breaking shoe! (4)

26 Exotic pink wading bird seen e.g. at Slimbridge WWT (8)

28 Songbird – might follow bull! (5)

29 Event such as Crufts (4)

30 Almost vertical like a cliff – here's rocks (5)

31 Scatters seeds – and pigs! (4)

DOWN

2 Artificial lake e.g. Kielder Water (9)

3 Roost, as swallows do… but not swifts (5)

4 Dandelion-like flower – bird of prey gets a small piece (7)

5 Sieves e.g. soil (7)

6 The common hawthorn (3, 4)

7 What male deer do in autumn… in Redruth (3)

8 Financial institutions by sides of river? (5)

13 Flexible twig of willow tree in gazebos I erected (5)

15 Shooting and fishing, etc. (5)

17 Lakeland fell overlooking Grasmere – makes owl shiver! (6, 3)

19 E.g. those, like Adam Henson, who farm rented land (7)

20 Underground plant 'stem' – gives him zero mutation (7)

21 General type of tree seen in a pinetum (7)

23 Moisture-retaining material put round base of plants (5)

25 Sounds of e.g. geese (5)

27 Cat-like cry of a buzzard (3)

CROSSWORD SOLUTIONS

NOVEMBER

ACROSS: 1 Butcher 5 St Bees 8 Fair 9 Viper 10 Neep 11/27/29 National Tree Week 12 Bridge 13 Straw 15 Shoveler 17 Marilyns 20 Aeron 22 Darent 24 Cardigan 28 Bleak 30 Beagle 31 Strayed

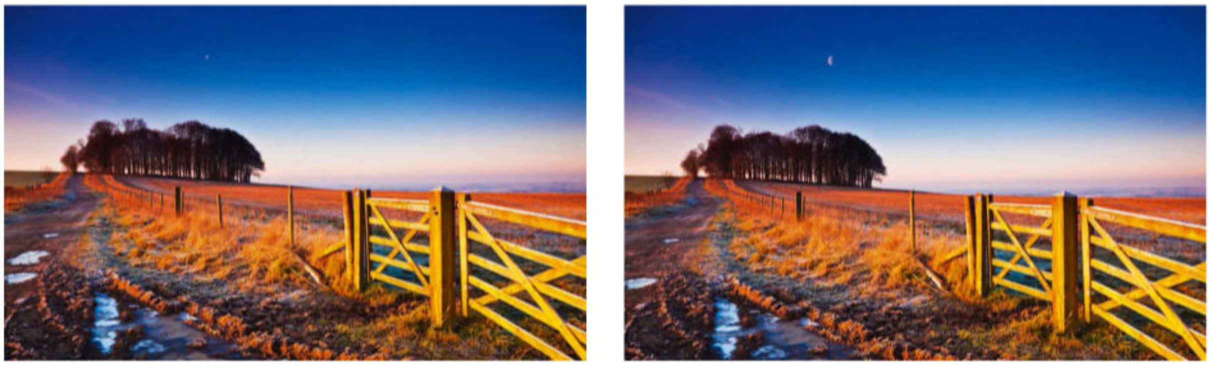
DOWN: 1/14 Beara Way 2 Terrier 3 Haven 4 Ripples 5 Shrub 6 Bonfire 7 Evergreen 13 Skara Brae 16 Ova 18 Iceberg 19 Suckers 21 Railway 23 Table 25 Roker 26 Ahead.

DECEMBER

ACROSS: 6 Adder 7 Mistletoe 9 Dam 10 Hedge 11 Marsh 12 Rockall 14 Tiercel 16 Laird 18 Tub 20 Nanny 21 Polecat 23 Infects 26 Rheum 28 Lodge 29 Moo 30 Shoreline 31 Gates

DOWN: 1 Adam 2 Brahma 3 Aspect 4 Star 5 Sea holly 6 Alder 7 Mudflat 8 Lampern 13 Chill 15 Conic 16 Lopgrass 17/29 December moth 19 Brindle 22 Tellin 24 Fledge 25 Scots 27 Eton.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



The 87-mile Ridgeway National Trail, an ancient route used by travellers, herdsmen and soldiers since prehistoric times, crosses the chalk ridge of the Berkshire Downs. Can you spot the five differences between these two images? Turn to page 97 for the answers.

Photo: Alamy

Your countryside

HAVE YOUR SAY ON RURAL ISSUES

Share your views and opinions by writing to us at:
Have your say: *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, Eagle House, Bristol BS1 4ST; or email **editor@countryfile.com**, tweet us **@CountryfileMag** or via Facebook **facebook.com/countryfilemagazine**

*We reserve the right to edit correspondence

Hungry birds take advantage of seed sowing time in midwinter

MORE SUPPORT FOR FARMERS

After reading John Craven's article about appreciation for farmers (October issue), I think British farmers are hugely important for our economy and wellbeing, and the health of the land and wildlife.

I grew up in rural Dorset, surrounded by farmland, nature and green space. I recently returned to see if it had changed. I'm happy to say that, apart from a few new cottages, it was just the same as I remember it. This is largely due to farmers taking care of the land and the support of local people. It is massively important to support our farmers and growers, to continue supplying our food. I have even more respect for those farmers who have kept wild space for nature, allowed hedges to grow and provided spaces for wildlife.

Climate change is now undeniable, and with war raging around the world, it is ever more important for our Government to support farmers. Without them, we could starve! Why doesn't *Countryfile* run a campaign to give more support to farmers? A questionnaire for the public to complete? A competition to write a short story on why our farmers are so important? And more...

Diana Bovet-White, via email

Managing editor Matt Baird replies: *We agree Diana, the rural community does a wonderful job of maintaining our green and pleasant land. We'll have muchmore on the challenges farmers are facing in later editions.*

A GREEN PORRIDGE LOAF?

Has anyone else tried the Porridge loaf recipe from Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's feature in your October issue? The first time I made it, it developed alarming bright green patches, so I threw it away. Undaunted, I made it again, omitting the pumpkin seeds which I suspected were the culprits. Unfortunately, the same green

Photos: Alamy

ANSWERS QUIZ: 1**a;** 2**d;** 3**b;** 4**c;** 5**a;** 6**d;** 7**b;** 8**c;** 9**a;** 10**d;** 11**c;** 12**a;** 13**c;** 14**c**

discolouration appeared and I found that the loaf left a metallic taste in the mouth. I came to the conclusion that the green colouring must surely be copper. I googled sunflower seeds and sure enough, they are a source of copper in the diet.

I suppose that the copper is soluble and I don't suppose the loaf is harmful, but it does beg the question – are the recipes tested?
Susan Hayward, via email

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall replies: *This is quite mysterious. The recipe was indeed tested and I was on the shoot where it was made and photographed. I've made this recipe lots of times since, and had lots of great feedback about it. I can only guess that you had an unusual batch of seeds which caused this reaction.*

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Often your magazine articles have brilliant illustrations with them. The artist's name is in the teeniest print. Can you please give them more clear credit with a more visible size print? Thanks so much for the great magazine you all put together!
Stella Baldwin, Worcestershire

TISSUE ISSUE

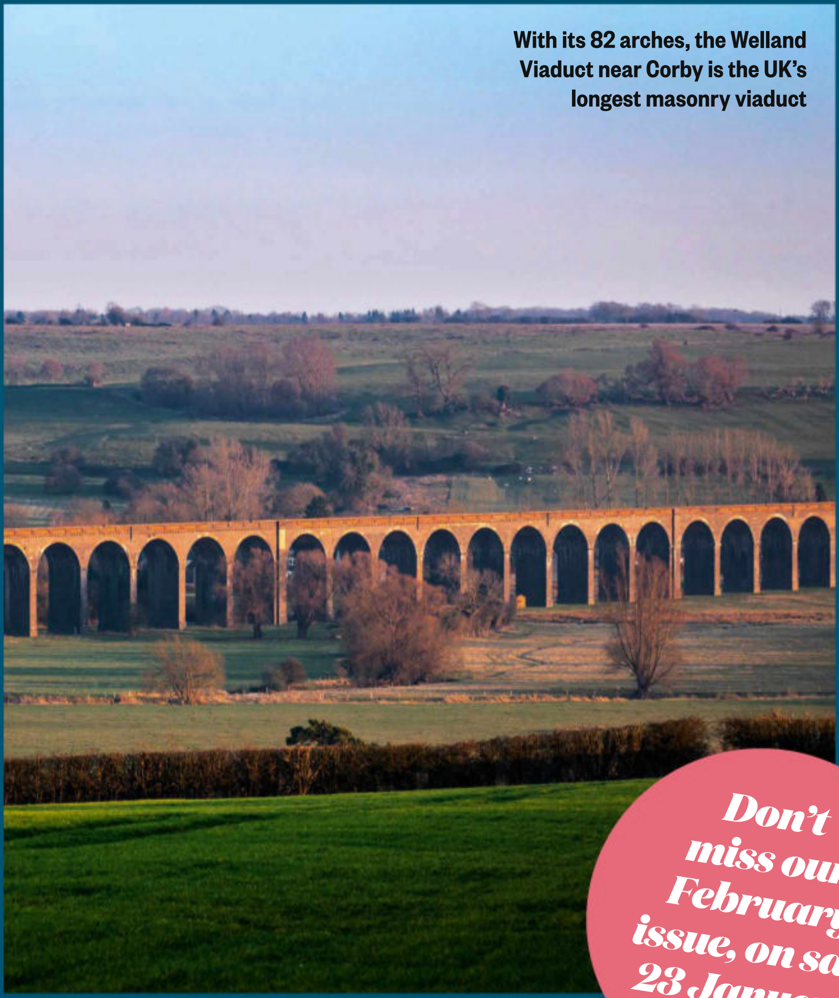
Littering in general has been covered in your magazine; we all agree it's unnecessary, lazy and dangerous to wildlife. However, the 'tissue issue' is everywhere in the outdoors, from local parks to mountain tops. We often need a wee when out walking, climbing or cycling etc, but why cannot the offenders (women and girls I am ashamed to say) just bag the used tissue until reaching a bin or toilet and dispose of it? Remember the saying: 'Take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time'.
Annie Ingram, Powys

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE ANSWERS, FROM PAGE 95 The moon is smaller; copse of trees is shorter; a puddle is missing; a fencepost is missing; bolts missing on gate.

Next month

Lost worlds

Rediscover a forgotten storybook valley in the heart of England



With its 82 arches, the Welland Viaduct near Corby is the UK's longest masonry viaduct

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COLUMN *Nicola Chester*

New year is the perfect time to commune with ghosts of our rural past

Illustration: Lynn Hatzius

In a new-year month of fog-muffled days or wild weather, it can feel there's not much to get out for. Though I've never believed this. This bare season has a beauty and intrigue all of its own, where surprising stories might surface.

A theatre, where the curtains of foliage are pulled back to reveal jewel-like mosses, or fallow deer resting in a wood, and then just as quickly occlude them in wreathing mists and early-falling night. Snow, sometimes. It's the perfect season for spotting ghosts.

By ghosts, I mean encounters with the rural past: the lives – human, animal, vegetative – that were here before us and whose traces and stories can still be found in the countryside. In tales still told that connect them with real events, meanings or cautionary tales, in records kept and stored, events witnessed and recalled, first, second or fifth hand. I used to be afraid of ghosts, but I'm not so much anymore – at least, not rural ones.

Over the course of two years, I've been writing and researching the lived experience of some local characters. Friendly ghosts who have left traces in diaries, out-of-print books and the memories of older residents; in objects I track down in museums full of carts, seed drills and smocks, in the County Records Office, in voice recordings where I detect the gloriously rich origins of my now diluted accent, and in certain bends in the road, in field names and overgrown tracks, when the rain washes away decades of leaf-mulched mud to reveal a road of packed chalk that for a time, showed up on an Ordnance Survey Map. And there's more: an old hay rake tangled in a hedge, a starling incorporating song no longer heard here into its repertoire, or resurgent gorse, intimating former heathland in the conifer plantation, or the way a faint beam of light falls on an old threshing floor when a window cataracted with cobwebs is rubbed.

I've always been aware of these friendly, gentle hauntings, but my enquiry has brought my home village and its fields alive in new depth of colour. It's something anyone can do, and the alchemy of it is that your own perspective and experience counts, colours, invites and challenges these ghosts. It's a kind of reading, and every reader has their individual response.

It's a good time of year to start, to travel back in time and ask of them what connections can be made? We bring our own pasts, presents and future to play; our own concerns, joys and crises, our own enlightenments, and through them perhaps can challenge and reinterpret our prejudices and acceptances, to write new stories. Be of no doubt, this communing with ghosts is a two-way conversation.

But it's one we must take with some caution: we shouldn't be too quick to judge, living as they were in their own time, but we mustn't over-laud them either, or view their lives with rose-tinted nostalgia, ignoring the hardships, poverty, tenacity and go-withouts; the lack of basic utilities, long after urban places had piped water, sanitation or electricity. They had their own ghosts too, but they can take a challenge and, I find, are rarely vengeful.

The countryside is an atmospheric place, once far fuller and busier than it is now. But if you let your imagination roam, making enquiries into rafters and gateposts, it can fill up again. And if a spectral human-shape approaches you from out of the mist, try greeting it. It may well turn and run, shape-shifting into the deer it actually was, it may not. Don't be afraid. Their life was a lived one, just like ours, in their time and with their own hauntings and stories. Just don't forget to bring your own. It's a conversation, after all. CF

Have your say What do you think about the themes raised here? Write to the address on page three or email **editor@countryfile.com**

Nicola Chester is the author of Richard Jefferies Award-winning and Wainwright Prize Highly Commended book *On Gallows Down.*

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